Extant

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Extant

by Kgraces

Summary

Extant: still existing; not destroyed or lost

Tim Drake has slipped through the cracks. He loves his family, but the rift between them has him feeling like he doesn't have a place with them anymore. The Bats still have Red Robin when they ask for him, but Tim hasn't been needed or wanted in a long time. When Red Robin goes missing during a case, the Bats realize they might just be too late to get him back.

Notes

Hi there!

This is my first multi-chapter fic, as well as my first work for the fandom. I'm very excited to share this, and I hope you enjoy!

Special thanks to Winter for all the help with brainstorming and for being so kind!

- Inspired by Fracture by wintersnight

Solitude and Solemnity

Red Robin moves like a ghost. The shadows of Gotham's darkest corners mask his presence as he slips from rooftop to rooftop—a cloak of silken night. Smog clouds his lungs, and his mouth tastes like ash and blood. Smoke curls into the night in a lazy arc, joining the other pollutants in the air. It's bitter against his lungs, burning like the building behind him. His plan to obtain the financial records of the weapons trafficking ring he's been tracking for *months* had gone sideways *fast*, and he's still reeling from adrenaline and blood loss.

Red stops a few buildings away and turns to watch the flickering tongues of fire. All he can do is watch the flames dance across the abandoned office complex, feel the heat against his face as the wood chars, as the metal warps. The thumb drive with the financial records clutched in his fingers certainly helps with that victorious feeling of a mission accomplished, but the blood coating his gauntlets serves as a reminder that he needs to get back to his Perch before he passes out.

He melts into the darkness with sirens ringing in his ears as the fire department finally arrives on the scene. Red moves to the alley where he'd stashed his Ducati. The bike purrs to life, and he sets off toward home, weaving through dimly lit backroads as quickly as he can. The cold bites at his exposed skin. Red grits his bloodied teeth to brace against the chill, nerves alight with pain. He drives into his underground bunker, puts the bike in park, and stumbles upstairs.

His first priority is coffee. Once the machine is brewing a pot, the cowl comes off, and Tim tosses the USB onto his dining table, next to his laptop. He'll start analyzing the data there once he dresses his injuries and gets his hands on a cup of coffee. He's a bit woozy as he makes his way into the bathroom, but he manages to scrub off the soot, blood, and grime that clings to his skin, and then disinfect and wrap his wounds without falling over, so he'll take it as a win.

He puts on his softest pajamas, wraps the comforter from his bed

around his shoulders, and moves back to the kitchen. Tim is half-tempted to just drink his coffee straight from the pot, but he fetches a mug, wrapping his slender fingers around the ceramic to let the warmth seep into them. He boots up his laptop and begins to scroll through the financial records.

He's been tracking the Two Horsemen for months, with little to show for it. The weapons traffickers are good at covering their tracks and destroying evidence. Red Robin has only stopped a few small shipments so far, so he has high hopes for this lead. He's not sure what he'll do next if he can't find anything useful from the records. He needs to find something that he can trace back to the ringleaders.

Tim frowns at the data in front of him. There's a shipment coming into Gotham in two days. He reads through the different transactions for all the necessary preparations, and one in particular catches his eye. A payment listed for product security is addressed to Thanatos. From what he's gathered, Thanatos is a mercenary—relatively new to the scene. He's maintained a relatively low profile, so far, and Tim doesn't know much about him. He takes a long sip of his coffee, resigned to a long night of research.

The guns will be transported via three cargo trucks, but he suspects one of them will be a decoy. A deposit for the truck rental was made yesterday, and it's short work for Tim to hack into the company's system to track down the license plates of the three vehicles. He'll plant trackers on them tomorrow night before patrol.

With that taken care of, Tim begins to dig into any information he can find on Thanatos. Tim knows he's not League trained; he'd sent a quick message to Pru to double-check, the first time he'd noticed Thanatos prowling around a few months ago. She'd confirmed his hunch, and he's grateful for it. Dealing with the Two Horsemen is complicated enough without League interference. Ra's isn't due for another attempt on Tim's life for another week or so, anyways.

Tim pulls up the file he'd started on Thanatos when he first appeared. It's still pretty bare-bones—just a timeline of all the crimes Tim can reliably link him to. Most of the earlier entries are located in San Francisco, but he's recently drifted east. Tim drums his fingertips against the table as he opens a surveillance video that captured Thanatos on one of his first jobs. He hasn't been caught on camera since.

The uniform is distinctive: a misty grey with a full-face mask, accented with steely blues. He moves fluidly, efficiently, as he cuts down the men surrounding him. When the violent flurry of motion stills, he seems almost unassuming. He's lithe, for a mercenary. Tim can estimate his relatively average proportions, but with the entirety of his skin covered by the suit, there aren't any other identifying features he can use to ID the guy.

Tim drifts back into the kitchen to refill his mug, lost in thought. He leans back against the marble countertop and sips at his coffee. If a mercenary has been hired to make sure there won't be any interference with the incoming shipment, Red Robin will have to keep track of him as well as the weapons. It would be best not to engage before he has more information.

A headache builds behind his eyes, and Tim sighs. He glances over to the microwave to check the time—4:26 in the morning. He has to be at WE in three hours. Tam would cheerfully kill him if he were to show up late for the board meeting that morning. He hasn't slept, but he wants to try to follow the trail of money from the bank account the Two Horsemen had deposited the security money into. Tim doubts that it's the actual account Thanatos uses, but it's a place to start.

Tim sits back down at his computer and wraps himself up in the comforter, now on his third cup of coffee. He accesses the bank's information and tracks through various wire transfers from Switzerland to Indonesia to France to Brazil—on and on—until he reaches an account that's housed in San Francisco. Other transactions with international accounts indicate that this isn't the first account set up, but it catches Tim's attention because the owner's name is one he

recognizes.

He bites his lip and pulls up another file. The name is listed under known aliases used by a minor gang he and the Titans have tangled with in the past. They haven't been active in years—not since Tim was Robin. Scrolling through his old reports is surreal. In a way, they were written by an entirely different person. Tim isn't that wide-eyed Robin anymore.

He's not really a Bat anymore, either.

Red Robin's relationship with the Bats has deteriorated over the past few years; things just haven't been the same since Bruce got lost in time. He's been flying solo for nearly two years now, only ever giving help and not receiving it in return. Having no backup has nearly gotten him killed enough times in Gotham that just *being* in the city makes his skin crawl. His mind wanders to the emergency beacon gathering dust in a drawer. He hasn't touched it in a year and a half—not since his eighteenth birthday.

Things with Bruce became unbearably tense after the near-assassination of Captain Boomerang Tim orchestrated. He hasn't spoken to Jason outside the mask since the disaster on his eighteenth. It's probably the only civil conversation they've had since the Battle for the Cowl, tucked away in his memory somewhere with a slice of cake and a flatline and a whisper of *please don't tell the others.* His relationship with Dick never recovered after Dick took Robin from him and gave it to Damian.

It's not about Robin though...not really. Dick had chosen Damian over him to be his *little brother*. He set their relationship aflame, burned it to the ground to keep himself and *his* Robin warm. Dick didn't just prioritize Damian; he completely pushed Tim out of his life in the process. The threat of Arkham and the complete *indifference* to Robin's murderous intent against him had made that clear enough. Dick didn't have enough room in his heart and mind left for Tim anymore. Losing

Robin had taken the last two things Tim had had left at that point: the title he'd worked so hard for and his big brother.

He doesn't even *want* to know if Dick had ever actually thought of himself as Tim's brother, or if their relationship was only pathetically one-sided. It doesn't matter now, though. Dick has Damian, and even Jason has been brought back into the fold. Tim held the Bats together long enough for Jason and Damian to have a family to come home to. He is glad, in his own way, even though he's alone now. He's still disappointed that he was never even given the choice to stay once the real family came back together, but he's served his purpose. Being the outcast in a family he loves is better than burning his bridges and never looking back.

At least in Jason's case, he burned his bridges purposefully, in a violent rampage that tore through Gotham's underworld like a wildfire. Tim hadn't made the choice for himself. He just finally understood his place—namely, that he didn't *have* one with them. After years of just being the Replacement, the stand-in for a Robin actually *chosen* by Batman to be his partner, the one tossed aside and practically told not to come back...Tim gets it. And now, after so long of no one reaching out unless they need something from Red Robin, Tim just has nothing left to give.

He'll answer the call-to-arms, but he won't stick around where he isn't wanted—isn't even *missed*. He knows better now.

Tim runs a hand through his hair and focuses on banishing those thoughts to the deepest recesses of his mind. He can't dwell on that. He pushes the hurt aside as ruthlessly as he can, because if he opens himself up to those emotions again, he's afraid that he'll be lost in them. A heavy sigh rushes from his lungs, and he returns to the file on his computer to begin eliminating potential suspects. The roster for the gang is sparse, and his information on Thanatos is nearly nonexistent, but he'll take any progress he can make as the hours slip by.

An alarm on his phone shakes him from his focus, alerting Tim that it's time to start getting ready for another long day at the office. Tam has already sent him several documents he'll need for the 8 a.m. meeting, so he skims through those as he goes through his usual routine. He forgoes breakfast but pours himself a full travel mug of coffee. It'll be necessary when dealing with the board members. Tim slips on his shoes, grabs his keys, and leaves the Perch to drive to Wayne Enterprises.

Morning traffic isn't *too* terrible, for a Tuesday in Gotham, and Tim parks his car with the knowledge that Tam isn't going to kill him for being late. They meet in his office and discuss the agenda for the board meeting, until he has to go and suffer through it himself. Dealing with the board of directors at WE is always a headache, but Tim feels like they're being even more obtuse than usual today. He has to grit his teeth to stop himself from verbally eviscerating them. The meeting drags on for what feels like ages, so when it finally ends, Tim is quick to escape.

Walking back into his office feels like having a bucket of iced water dumped over his head. He stands dumbly, fingers still wrapped around the door's handle. Bruce stands behind his desk, studying the Gotham skyline from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Tim quickly schools his features into a neutral expression as he shuts the door and folds his hands behind his back.

"Bruce, what can I do for you?" He's grateful that he manages to keep his voice cool and professional. Bruce turns and levels him with an even look. Tim fights the urge to bite his lip.

"Ah, Tim," Bruce says. "I'd like a word with you."

"Is there a case?" Tim asks. He's not sure why else Bruce would want to swing by his office for a chat. Bruce nods and hands him a file folder. Tim takes it and thumbs through the various documents. "Time sensitive?"

“Somewhat. I was hoping you could review a file for me.”

“It’ll most likely have to wait until tomorrow morning,” Tim says with a thoughtful hum. “I’ve got an ongoing case at the moment that needs my attention tonight.” He looks up at Bruce and waits for his nod. “Alright, then. I’ll handle it. Is there anything else you need?”

Bruce looks like he’s about to say something else when Tam pokes her head in and calls Tim away to his next meeting. He ducks out of the office with a quiet word of farewell to his former mentor.

He’s only partially glad Bruce doesn’t care enough to call him back. The other part of him just feels sick.

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Tim curses his luck as he suits up, later that evening. Raindrops tap against the windows of his apartment, and the gentle roll of thunder comes from the dark clouds looming overhead. Tonight’s job is going to *suck*. But still, he’d rather be out there than stuck in his empty apartment with only his work to keep him company. The casefile Bruce had given him lays open on his coffee table, and annotated pages with color-coded notes in Tim’s cramped handwriting are already scattered around the manila folder. He bites back a sigh as he eyes the documents. The case will have to wait until after he tags those three trucks.

Red Robin soars across the rooftops, mindful of the brewing storm. He takes the most efficient route to the truck rental company’s location and slips into the garage with practiced ease. It’s almost too easy to plant the trackers. He’s relieved to have that part of his evening go well, at least, but he’s still not thrilled with getting soaked to the

bone. Red cuts his patrol short and heads back early.

Tim's toweling his hair dry when he gets a call from his team. With a press of a button on his communicator, a panel on the wall in his living room slides back, revealing a large screen. He accepts the call, and an exhausted grin makes its way to his face as the monitor comes to life with a soft hum. His team's faces come into view.

"Tim!" Bart greets brightly. Kon stands behind him, chin resting atop his head. "We miss you!"

"I miss you guys, too," Tim says. "I should be back in San Fran soon, though. I finally got a decent lead on the Two Horsemen. Once I follow through with that, I'll come home."

Thunder rumbles outside, swiftly followed by a crack of lightning. Kon frowns and narrows his eyes at Tim.

"You were out in that storm tonight," he says flatly. "Weren't you?"

"I had to be," Tim says with a shrug and an embarrassed look. "I'll be fine, Kon."

"Is that our fearless leader I hear?" Cassie's voice chimes in. She appears on screen a moment later, expression brightening once she catches sight of him. "Hi Tim! How's it going?"

"He's going to get himself sick," Kon grumbles before he can reply. Tim groans and buries his face in his hands as his friend continues to talk over his muttered protests. "He was out in the rain for who knows how long. Seriously dude, your immune system sucks, and we all

know the Bats are shit and can't be trusted with taking care of you."

"This is why you've gotta come back soon," Bart says, pouting. "We need to be around to make sure you don't do anything stupid."

"Because Gotham is the *worst* , and you're the actual *dumbest* genius ever," Cassie agrees with a nod.

"Yeah, yeah, I love you guys too. Even though you're all overprotective mother hens." Tim grins at his friends, warm and affectionate.

They chat for a little while longer before he tells them he should get going. Bart pouts and whines like a little kid. Kon snorts, but Cassie tilts her head and asks why he has to go so soon. *Busted.* Tim runs a hand through his still-damp hair, expression sheepish. He knows how they're going to react, but he won't lie to them about it.

"I promised Bruce that I'd give him a hand with a case," he admits. "It might be a nice break from working on the Horsemen issue. I'll just have to make sure I sleep for a few hours tomorrow between work and following those trucks."

His team exchanges worried glances, and Kon loses the silent argument over who has to go try to talk some sense into him.

"Tim, you know you don't *have* to help them, right? You don't owe them anything, especially after all the shit they've put you through."

"I know that, Kon," he says, smiling at him. The concern in his friend's eyes warms him right down to the bones. "It's just...even though

they've made it clear that I'm not part of their family, that they don't even want me *around*, I'll still be there to help them however I can. I may not mean anything to the Bats, but I still care about them."

The Titans don't look convinced, but they know how stubborn Tim is. They reluctantly wish him a good night and hang up. He stands there for a moment after the screen goes dark, feeling a rush of affection for his team. They really are the only family he has, nowadays, and he loves them all fiercely.

Feeling more content than he had an hour ago, Tim settles on his couch to continue his work on the case Bruce brought him earlier that day. It's a list of recent hires at Arkham Asylum. Bruce had already made detailed notes on each of them, but apparently there have been whispers of a new guard helping a plot to stage a breakout. He loses himself in the work, analyzing each of the personnel files, double-checking and confirming all of Bruce's information and potential suspects.

The file doesn't take him as long as he thought it would to sift through, and once Tim sends his analysis to the Batcomputer, he lets himself collapse in bed, exhausted. Sleep is swift to rear its head and snag him in its jaws.

The God of Death

Chapter Summary

Red Robin closes in on the Two Horsemen, but the mercenary Thanatos has plans for him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is primarily the reason for the violence warning on this fic. I'm admittedly still new to this, so if you think additional warning tags or the rating should be updated, please don't hesitate to let me know!

I hope you enjoy!

The ache in his lungs when his alarm goes off the next morning greets him like a sucker punch. Tim struggles to sit up, coughing as he swipes to unlock his phone and turn off the chiming sound. He sighs, feeling miserable and achy. As much as he wants to delay the inevitable, he knows he probably should get this over with. He thumbs through his contacts and dials Tam's number. She picks up on the third ring.

"Please don't tell me that my idiot boss—who doesn't have a spleen—did *not* go out in the rain last night."

"Good morning to you, too," Tim croaks. His voice sounds awful, like he's been gargling sharp rocks. At the sound of it, Tam groans.

"Damnit, Tim. Stay home today, okay? I'll reschedule your meeting with the head of R&D, but you'll still have to look over the quarterly reports by the end of the week." She grumbles to herself for a moment, but when she speaks again, her voice is softer. "Feel better soon, and let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks," Tim says, and *ouch*, talking hurts. "I'll do my best." He and

Tam hang up, and he sends a text to Kon, just because he's bitter.

You jinxed me, jackass.

Kon calls him just so he can laugh at him for a few minutes. He only gets away with it because he knows Tim won't be able to yell at him for it, but Tim resolves to hack into his computer to prank him in revenge. He'll do that later, once he feels less like death warmed over. For now, he takes some antibiotics, downs some cough syrup, and rolls back over to get some more sleep. He manages to doze for a few hours before he finally drags himself out of bed and into a hot shower.

If he feels this awful now, then tonight's mission is going to *suck*.

Tim pulls on a hoodie over his pajamas—the one Cass had left at his Perch the last time she visited from Hong Kong—and walks on silent feet to the kitchen. He digs around in his freezer to find the soup Alfred had brought him a while ago. The old butler still stops by every few weeks to leave food in Tim's pantry and fridge. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that Alfred is in cahoots with his team on their whole '*let's keep this idiot alive* ' plan.

Tim sighs and goes to the couch with a steaming bowl in hand. He eats and lets himself pass out for another few hours, too tired to move back to his bedroom. He manages to kick off his softest throw blanket in his sleep, waking up with it tangled around his legs. A glance over the shoulder at the clock tells him that he's still got a few hours before the shipment is scheduled to come in.

He stretches as he rises, deciding to do some last-minute checks over his equipment and his contingencies for tonight. He makes his way downstairs, pushing back the sick teenager and bringing the vigilante to the surface. Red Robin settles into his skin, determined and

confident. He confirms his plan and pulls up the tracking information. The trucks haven't been taken to a central location between the time they were picked up this morning and now.

Red studies the three potential drop sites, trying to figure out which one is most likely the decoy and which one is most likely to have the larger shipment. He decides to go to the truck closest to the docks. The shipment will most likely be carried into Gotham on one of the boats, which should offer a lead on their supplier. With that settled, he puts on his suit and starts up the Ducati. He rides out and stashes the bike in one of Hood's underground garages, so he can guarantee it won't get stolen while he's taking the Two Horsemen down.

A cracked window on the second floor of the warehouse the truck was stashed in lets Red sneak into the building undetected. He lands on a metal catwalk and scrutinizes his surroundings. He can see the truck on the floor below, surrounded by a dozen armed men. There's no sign of the distinctive grey and blue of Thanatos. Red takes a steadying breath and lets the darkness settle around him like a blanket.

The guards chat amongst themselves in relaxed tones. A few of them smoke, clouding the air with the acrid smell of cigarettes. Red watches them all with a cool eye, drawing up plans in his mind's eye, ready to leap into action at the slightest shift in the room. Several long hours pass by at a crawl, so when the warehouse doors creak open, Red nearly breathes a relieved sigh. A man walks into the room, dressed impeccably in a sharp suit. He's followed closely by Thanatos.

"War," the guard Red had pegged as the leader of the men greets. They shake hands as Red bites back a cough. War, one of the Two Horsemen's leaders, is *here*. He can't believe this rare stroke of luck, but he makes the most of it, examining the man's face to memorize every detail. "Are we ready to load up the shipment?" The guard asks, shaking Red out of his thoughts.

War nods, and the men follow him outside the warehouse to the

docks, where they begin to retrieve the boxes of weaponry from one of the cargo ships and load them into the rented truck. Red watches, just another shadow in the old building. Thanatos moves out of the men's way, leaning against the far wall, looking bored. War starts a hushed conversation with the head guard, and from what Red can discern through lip-reading, the guns will be moved to a secure location. They won't be put into circulation among Gotham's criminal underbelly until *'that pesky bird'* is taken care of. His blood runs cold. Red's skin itches with the uncomfortable feeling of being watched, and when he looks over again, Thanatos is staring straight at him.

Awesome, Thanatos knows he's here. It's not ideal, but he'll just have to make it work. He's definitely faced worse odds before. At least he knows now that the weapons won't hit the streets until Red Robin stops investigating them, hot on their heels. The reassurance is a pale one, but it eases the tight feeling that's settled in his chest. He and Thanatos simply watch one another while the other men in the warehouse continue with their work, and Red wishes he had time to panic over how quickly things had fallen apart.

He was supposed to be able to observe them unnoticed, track down the Two Horsemen's supplier with information from the ship, and get the hell out of there. If he leaves now, Thanatos will follow, and the Horsemen will know they're compromised. He'll just have to risk taking the mercenary down after the others leave. After all, this pesky bird isn't going down without a fight.

Thanatos doesn't make his move until after War and his men leave, but when he does, it's an explosion of motion. Red has to leap out of the path of a flurry of gunfire. He jumps down from the catwalk, landing on the concrete floor and immediately springing into a run for cover. Thanatos laughs, cold and cruel, and it sends a bolt of annoyance surging through Red's veins. He *refuses* to be toyed with.

Red draws his bo staff and tosses smoke pellets across the room—less for cover and more for a distraction. He takes the split-second Thanatos needs to recover from the surprise to close the distance between them. The smoke in the air parts like a curtain at the cut of

Red's swing. The staff connects in a solid hit with Thanatos's jaw. Red dodges the counterattack, dancing away with a dangerous, sharp smile on his face.

He moves to disarm his opponent, wary of the gun, but Thanatos seems to anticipate his movements. Red receives a steel-toed boot to the ribs for his efforts. His breath flees from his lungs, and he stumbles back, coughing. Thanatos prowls forward, drawing a mean-looking knife from his belt.

The two of them circle around one another for a moment, both waiting for the other to make the first move. Red's mind draws up as many contingencies as it can, but he still struggles to evade the arc of the knife's path when Thanatos finally breaks and lunges at him. He drops to a crouch and tries to sweep his opponent's feet out from under him, but Thanatos manages to trap his ankle underneath his boot. The bone breaks with a sharp *crack*, and Red has to bite his tongue until it bleeds to hold back his cry of pain. He glowers at the mercenary looming over him, swinging his bo to force Thanatos back and give himself room to breathe.

He struggles to stand, careful not to put weight on his injured ankle. His opponent stands a few feet away, with his arms folded across his chest. His posture seems amused, if not downright smug. Red's chest burns as he suppresses another painful cough.

"Red Robin, there's been a breakout at Arkham. You're needed at Robinson Park immediately." Batman's voice in his ear startles him badly enough that he nearly flinches.

His fingers tighten around his bo, the only outward sign of his distress, but Thanatos notices his momentary lapse in focus. He takes advantage of the distraction by throwing his knife with deadly precision. Red manages to dodge a fatal blow, but the weapon still grazes his side as he stumbles. Thanatos advances on him, delivering a powerful blow to the side of his head. Red Robin falls, head cracking

against the concrete, and everything goes black.

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He comes to with his shoulders shouting at him in agony. Red's wrists are bound together, and his restraints are looped over a metal pipe which spans the length of the room. His feet are bare, and his toes barely scrape the ground. His gauntlets, harness, and armor are gone, leaving Red in just his bodysuit.

Glancing around, Red takes stock of his surroundings. He quickly realizes he's in some sort of basement—most likely an abandoned residential building, retrofitted to suit the mercenary's needs. For the moment, he's alone, but there's no sign of his gear. Thanatos must've also injected him with a paralytic agent, because Red has trouble trying to wiggle his fingers and toes. His head feels like it's stuffed full of cotton. It takes him a long moment to regain his other senses. Noise drifts to him from a small radio sitting innocuously in the corner of the room.

"...vigilante known as the Red Hood conducted a swift and brutal takedown of the Joker, before the psychotic clown had an opportunity to attack any civilians. Nightwing and Robin apprehended Scarecrow shortly after. Multiple witnesses have reported ongoing combat between Batman and Poison Ivy in Robinson Park. Furthermore, several high-profile criminals still remain at large."

Well, that's not good.

He just has to come up with a plan. It'll take some time, but Red doesn't really think Thanatos plans to kill him quickly. He takes a shuddering breath, wincing at the pain that lances through his chest. Thinking feels like he's trying to swim against a strong current, but he's stubborn enough to try it anyway.

There are definitely cameras installed in the place, because not five minutes after he'd first stirred, the door opens, and Thanatos descends the creaky wooden stairs. He's still in his uniform, but Red imagines that he's smirking behind the mask. Red meets his stare as steadily as he can with his blurry vision, refusing to be intimidated.

"Hello Robin," the mercenary greets. His voice is softer than he would've expected, but it's no less dangerous—deadly in all its gentle darkness. Red's blood turns to ice, and his mind stutters to a halt. This is personal. Red recalls the file he dug up the other night and grits his teeth. Thanatos most likely knows him from back then, especially if he's calling him by *that* name. "It's been some time."

"Since Los Segadores, I presume?" Red says, doing his best to bury the hurt being called by his former title is causing him. He's relieved to hear his voice remain level.

"I knew it was you," Thanatos says, moving closer. "Los Segadores, yes. You were the little Robin who took down my old gang. The third, right? The one they threw away." A gloved hand lifts Red's chin, thumb pressing against a bruise on his cheek.

"You've been keeping tabs on me," Red states. There's an unspoken question of *why?* in his tone. Thanatos agrees with a hum.

"That's because you're just like me. Maybe that's why they don't want you anymore? You're smart, too smart. Strategic, pragmatic, stealthy," he says. His touch is almost gentle, and it makes Red want to bite his fingers off. "You hold yourself back. You could be so much *more*, a breathing weapon."

Red stifles a sigh, but something within him relaxes. He's flooded with

a grim sort of triumph. At least he's the one being targeted, not one of the others. It isn't Dick, or Jason, or Damian strung up at the mercy of a killer. Thanatos steps away, moving toward the shelves in the corner. He rifles through a box and returns after a moment.

"It's obvious in the way you fight, Robin. You're *deadly*. You can't go back to them, not after they let you fly and fall. I was hired to murder you, of course, but my employers are too short-sighted. I took the job once I learned who exactly the Horsemen want dead. It would be such a waste to kill you. You have so much *potential*, so I want to offer you a choice." He holds up a grey and blue mask, similar in design to his own. "I'll carry out my orders, or you can let me temper you into something remarkable."

Red's laugh is a cold, ugly sound.

"Nice try, *asshole*, but I've heard the whole *'come to the darkside'* speech before. I'm not going to join you. So what if they don't want me anymore? So what if they took everything from me, threw me out as soon as someone better came along? It doesn't matter. I don't fight for *them*, and I certainly won't fight for *you*, either."

The knife sinking into his side—right up to the hilt—is enough of a response. Red bites down, jerking in his restraints to get away from the blazing agony. It's okay; he's survived so much worse. He can take this. He just has to suffer through it until he can figure out a way to escape. Even if Thanatos manages to kill him before he does, it'll be alright. The Bats will be just fine.

"No one's coming for you this time, little bird," Thanatos croons. Red channels all the fury he's ever received at the hands of Jason Todd and snarls, the feral sound ripping from his chest to cut through the space between them.

“You think I don’t already know that?” Fury rises up in him, white-hot and consuming. “You think I don’t know that they’re not coming? They don’t *care*. I’m not family, not a Robin anyone actually *wants*, so it doesn’t *matter* what happens to me.”

“Poor little Robin,” Thanatos says, voice still infuriatingly gentle. “No one’s going to miss you, hm? And with that Arkham breakout last night, well, the Bat will be too busy with the fallout to worry about his wayward bird. That is, if he even notices you’re gone.”

He laughs then, twisting the knife.

“I’ve got plenty of time to change your mind, and if not, I’ll drop your corpse off for him to find.” He moves to circle around Red, stopping directly behind him. Thanatos leans closer to murmur in his ear. “Or maybe I should just *leave* you here, see what happens first—he finds you, or you *rot.* ”

Red Robin lowers his head and braces himself.

Lost Bird Found

Chapter Summary

Batman and Nightwing receive some unsettling information.

A young man named Dorian Hawthorne gets arrested at 10 p.m. on Monday night. Two hours later, the Batsignal flickers to life and illuminates the inky skies. Commissioner Jim Gordon waits on the roof next to the signal, wrapped up in his warmest coat, breath fogging the air in front of him. He's not aware he has company until the Bat emerges from the shadows with Nightwing at his side. Gordon straightens up, getting right down to business.

"We've got a suspect in custody demanding to speak to you." Gordon sighs, lifting his hands from his pockets to breathe some warmth into them.

"I'm assuming his cooperation relies on my involvement," Batman replies, his low timbre flat with annoyance. Nightwing frowns and folds his arms, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as Batman sighs. "What is this about?"

"We have reason to believe he orchestrated Wednesday's Arkham breakout."

"Keaton Westwood?" Nightwing guesses. Westwood is the guard both Batman *and* Red Robin flagged as suspicious. It would only make sense that he'd be the one responsible.

"Yes, but that's just an alias. We ran his prints, and he's already got a record. His real name is Dorian Hawthorne." Gordon passes over a crisp manila folder with Hawthorne's file tucked neatly inside, which Batman begins to flick through. Nightwing stands up on his toes to read over his shoulder. He spots a name he recognizes.

“Hang on a sec, B. Los Segadores? Isn’t that one of the gangs Red Robin took down years ago?” A gloved finger trails down the line of text as he reads. “Yeah, look here. ‘*Apprehended by Young Justice*.’ That’s definitely Red’s work.”

“Should we call him in?” Gordon asks. Nightwing recognizes the exasperated look of someone sick of dealing with the convoluted social dynamics of the Bats.

“No,” Batman says, resolute.

Nightwing has to bite back a sigh. Red completely dropped off the radar again, right before last week’s Arkham breakout. He does that sometimes—like when he disappeared for *six months* after he found Bruce and just...came back one day with no warning or explanation. It’s something they’ve all had to get used to when dealing with him. His timing has definitely been better, though.

“Suit yourself,” Gordon says with a shrug. He gestures toward the door. “Shall we?”

The Commissioner leads the two vigilantes down the stairs and into the precinct. They first stop by his office, where he shucks off his heavy coat and collects a cell phone from his desk. He hands the phone to Batman. A thin crack trails across the glass screen, spider-webbing out toward the corners.

“Hawthorne claims there’s evidence you need to see stored on his phone. The security on it is pretty tight, but I’m guessing that won’t be a problem for you.”

Nightwing snorts, smiling boyishly in response to the unimpressed look both Batman and Gordon send him. The Commissioner ushers them out of his office and toward the interrogation room Hawthorne waits in. Batman tells Nightwing to hang back in the observation room, so he gives a mock salute and trails after Gordon to watch the Bat's intimidation tactics at work.

The two men exchange terse introductions, and Nightwing takes a moment to observe their suspect. The guy is mostly unassuming, with average features and height. He looks athletic, and his skin is sun-darkened and splashed with freckles. He has mousy brown hair, a crooked nose, and a long, jagged scar winding down his left forearm. He looks uncomfortable under the weight of Batman's stare, which is nothing unusual. His fingers keep twitching, like he wants to reach for a cigarette. Nightwing recognizes the motion from time spent with Jason.

"There's a video on that phone. You should watch it." He offers to help access the phone, but Batman's already gotten past the security on it.

Nightwing can't see the screen from where he's standing, but he can hear the audio when the video starts playing. A scream of unadulterated *agony* rips through the room, and Nightwing's heart lurches toward his throat. Oh *God*, that's Tim's voice.

Before he's even aware of it, he's moving—throwing the door open, completely deaf to Gordon's protests, and prowling into the interrogation room. He stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Batman, who seems unsurprised at his intrusion. Nightwing can only see just how rattled Batman is because he's known him for so long. It's in the subtle pinch at the corners of his mouth, the grim tension in his jaw, the utter stillness that's overtaken him.

"What the *fuck* have you done to Red Robin?" Nightwing snarls. Fury burns hot in his chest, and he trembles with it. Hawthorne just tosses

his head back to laugh at him, so *smug*, and Batman has to hold Nightwing back from lunging for his throat.

"Oh, I simply showed him just how little you Bats really care about him. Isn't he supposed to be family? And you didn't even *know* he'd been taken, did you? It worked out for me, though—gave me plenty of time to play."

The smile he sends them is twisted and ugly, cruel amusement cutting the curve of his mouth. Batman growls through gritted teeth, but he doesn't speak.

"Your poor little bird. Such a shame," Hawthorne croons. "He has so much potential—potential I tried to convince him to give into. And even though he knows he's not wanted by any of *you*, he still refused. I intended to kill him by my own hand, but," he shrugs, lifting his shackled wrists. He leans back in his seat and lets his hands fall back onto the table, the motion accompanied by the clatter of metal against wood. "I suppose he'll die much more slowly now. Or maybe my employers will send someone to finish the job."

Nightwing's stomach drops. They hadn't even known he'd been taken. He exchanges a glance with Batman and steps out of the room. He takes a moment to just let himself panic, fingers trembling as he struggles to get the sound of Tim's screaming out of his head. Once he has his breathing under control, he activates the comm in his ear and opens the main channel.

"We've got an emergency. Everyone, get to the Batcave as soon as possible."

"This'd better be real fuckin' good, N," Hood's voice grumbles back. "Kinda busy here." The sound of gunfire cracks across the line.

“Code Red,” Nightwing says, nearly choking on the words. “Possible Code Black.”

“Shit, seriously?” Hood huffs a breath and fires another three shots. “On my way.”

“ETA ten minutes,” Batgirl chimes in. “Want me to call Black Bat? I’m sure she’ll hop on a flight as soon as she hears.”

“Call her,” Nightwing confirms. He moves down the hall, back to the stairwell. “I’m leaving the police station now. Agent A, can you send a Batmobile here? B is still talking to our guy, so he’s going to leave after me.”

He receives Alfred’s confirmation just as he reaches the roof. Nightwing takes a moment to just breathe in the biting chill before he leaps. He sets a brutal pace back to the Cave, anxious to start the search for Red Robin. When he arrives, he sees that Jason and Steph have beaten him there. Neither of them have changed out of their uniforms, but they’ve both taken off their masks. Nightwing follows suit.

“Grayson,” Damian says, scowling as he hobbles over on his crutches. He’s been extra prickly since he broke his foot fighting Scarecrow. “What is going on?”

“Red’s been taken,” Dick says. The words are acid against his teeth. “Possibly killed.”

“*What?* ” Steph gasps, face paling. “What happened?”

“He was kidnapped,” he replies with a grimace. “Last Wednesday. We’ve got evidence of torture.”

Jason curses lowly, and there’s murder in his eyes. His expression is the fiercest Dick’s seen on him since he came back to the family. Dick gets it, and he doesn’t flinch in the face of this fury, because he knows the whole situation hits Jason differently. The thought that one of their own has been tortured, maybe even killed, dredges up a lot of memories he knows Jason would rather keep buried.

“We’ll find him,” Dick says. He moves to Jason’s side and puts a hand on his shoulder. “That’s why we’re all here.” The Batmobile roars into the Cave just as Jason opens his mouth to retort. He frowns, sending a venomous glare toward it. He shrugs off Dick’s hold and stalks away from him as Batman steps out and removes the cowl.

“It’s imperative that we find Red Robin before anyone else does,” Bruce says, in lieu of a greeting. “We need to gather information on his most recent movements as quickly as possible. It’s likely the signal from his emergency beacon is being blocked, so we—” He’s interrupted by a snort from Jason.

“I fuckin’ doubt that, old man,” he says. “Baby Bird wouldn’t bother usin’ it in the first place.”

“What do you mean, Jay?” Dick asks, perplexed, tilting his head to the side in a way which often gets compared to a lost puppy. Jason rolls his eyes at his older brother.

“After he got ignored last time, why would he?” He folds his arms across his broad chest. It’s a challenge that’s met with blank looks. “Look up the records if ya don’t believe me,” Jason snaps. “I’m gonna

break into the kid's Perch."

"Wait a sec," Steph says. "You know how to get past his security?"

"Who'd ya think saved his scrawny ass?" Jason retrieves his helmet and keys from one of the worktables. "I'll letcha know what I find."

The Red Hood revs up his bike and drives away at a breakneck pace. The others stand in a startled silence for a moment after his departure. Bruce snaps out of it first, turning to the Batcomputer with a steely expression. He pulls up their communication records from the past six months and frowns. He has to extend his search parameters to eighteen months before he finds Red Robin's last emergency alert.

July 19th. Tim's birthday.

Reading the date alone makes Dick feel like he's been kicked in the teeth. Seeing that the call had gone unanswered sends cold fingers of dread trailing down his spine. Steph looks heartbroken and furious in equal measures. Bruce passes a hand over his face, shoulders heavy with the weight of his shortcomings. After a moment, he collects himself and starts to upload the footage from the cell phone onto the computer.

"Damian," Bruce says, gesturing for his youngest son to join him. He pulls up a still from the video. Dick can see Tim, hanging unconscious from his restraints, and he has to turn away, feeling ill. "Most of the room is visible from the camera angle. I need you to analyze the type of building we're looking at. It'll help us narrow our search after we get a general location." Damian nods and sits down, propping his crutches against the arm of the chair.

"Little fucker upgraded his security. Took a while, but I got in. We

have three possible locations for his last job," Jason announces over the comms. "Sendin' the addresses now." He cuts the connection, and Dick turns to look at his adoptive father, waiting for instructions. Bruce doesn't look up from reading Jason's message on his burner phone.

"Barbara, have you found any footage from traffic cameras?" Bruce asks. She probably hacked into the Batcomputer as soon as the Code Red went out and has been listening the whole time. Sure enough, she starts a video call a moment later, face drawn and pale. There's a laptop balanced in her lap, and she's typing furiously, even as she greets them.

"It looks like Red drove toward the docks." She hums thoughtfully and tucks a stray strand of her red hair behind an ear. "Two vehicles left the location that night after Red Robin got there." She follows the footage for a few minutes, tapping a finger against the body of the laptop. "It looks like one truck met up with another, which came from the location he marked in Chinatown. That's most likely the shipment he was tracking. A smaller car drove into the Narrows."

"Dick, you're with me. Stephanie, help Alfred prep the medbay." Bruce says, pulling the cowl back down. They both nod, and Dick moves to put his mask back on, following Batman to the Batmobile. Once he's in the car, Nightwing calls Red Hood to give him an update.

"We're going to the Narrows to search. Robin and Oracle are trying to get a lock on a specific location."

"Got it," Hood replies. "I'll head that way."

The drive goes by in silence. Nightwing's nerves all buzz with energy, and he feels like he can't sit still. He's never really been able to stay motionless, but at the moment, it's less of an itch against the back of

his skull and more of a burning sensation clawing its way across his skin. He tries to distract himself from the bleak thoughts swirling around in his head, hoping to lose himself in the blur of colors passing by the window. The harder he tries to block out the sound of his brother's screaming from that awful video, still rattling around in his head, the more insistent it becomes.

God, *Tim*. He's been missing for five days, and they hadn't even *noticed*. In his mind's eye, he can still see Tim as he was when they met—that tiny, brilliant kid, with a heart too big, brimming with adoration for his childhood heroes. He'd been so scrappy and dorky and full of life, back then. That spark, that enthusiasm for putting a little good into their broken world, has been all but snuffed out. He's not sure when it happened, but his little brother has become a completely different person—all muted colors in temperament, quiet, dangerous cunning, and dark shadows slashed underneath his eyes. He's too thin and haunted and bleak and distrusting and cold, and it *hurts* to see him like that.

"You said we'd be okay. My entire life has burnt down! Again! I don't call this 'okay,' Dick."

Dick hasn't interacted with Tim outside the mask since…he can't even remember. Every time he's suggested movie nights, lunchtime get-togethers, going out for coffee, *anything*, really, he's given the cold shoulder. He misses hanging out with Tim, but his efforts have all been rebuffed, leaving him at a loss. He can only remember one time over the past *two years* that Tim reached out, wanting to spend time together. It had been truly terrible luck that Dick already had plans with Damian that day.

"*What earth are we on that you choose* him *over* me?"

Nightwing closes his eyes and leans his forehead against the cool glass of the window. Guilt tastes like iron against his tongue. He couldn't even bring himself to look Tim in the eye while he took away the *one*

thing he had left and gave it to the kid who wanted him dead. It was the right choice for Damian, but he'd sacrificed Tim in the process. The thought that he might never get the chance to make it right, to show Tim just how much he loves him, feels like the snap of a rope—feels like falling.

"How'd you know? How did you know I'd be there to save you?"

"You're my brother, Dick. You'll always be there for me."

Things just haven't been the same between them since Bruce got lost in time. Something fundamental broke between him and Tim, and he doesn't know how to *fix it*. He thought his little brother would understand, would *be there*, so they could suffer through the aftermath of losing Bruce *together*. All this time, he thought Tim was okay, but now...he's not so sure.

A message from Robin draws him out of his thoughts.

"Hey B, Robin says we're looking for a residential building with a single room, underground basement. Oracle has it narrowed down to a few blocks, and from schematics Robin dug up, there are twenty buildings we need to check. O's hacking into the power grid right now to see if she can find anything suspicious."

Batman nods but doesn't speak. Nightwing passes the message on to Hood, and they meet up in a darkened alley near the center of the area they're going to search. Hood's already waiting for them when they park, leaning against his motorcycle as he checks over his weapons. He waves lazily as he holsters the gun he's holding. His posture seems relaxed at first glance, but Nightwing knows him well enough to see the tension in his shoulders. Hood seems just as eager to find their wayward bird as he is, and a confusing mix of pride for this brother and worry for another sends Nightwing reeling. Batman's

steadying hand on his shoulder grounds him back to reality.

"Each of you will check five possible locations. Nightwing, take the upper right block. Hood, check the upper left. I'll handle the rest." They split up accordingly, and Nightwing finally gets to *move*. The tension in his muscles has him wound up like a spring. As he silently runs toward the first address, he relishes the feeling of the bitter chill whistling past his ears.

Nightwing clears the first two locations with ease, and he's on his way to the third when Oracle contacts him. A spike in electricity usage at one of the houses on this block started five days ago, when Red Robin was taken. Nightwing changes direction to where Oracle directs him, taking off in a near sprint.

Oracle leads him to a rundown, two-story house. Most of the windows are boarded up, and the porch steps sag under the weight of their years. The front door is locked, so Nightwing impatiently picks the lock open and crosses the threshold. He chooses his steps carefully, wary of the rotting floorboards. He finds the door to the basement quickly enough and wrenches it open, nearly tearing it off its hinges.

He peers down into the shadows of the basement and nearly sobs.

Tim.

The Veil Lifts

Chapter Summary

The Bats begin to realize just what Tim thinks about his role in the family.

Chapter Notes

Hi there!

Just a quick note that the summer semester at my college started this week. I hope to maintain my weekly upload schedule, but if that becomes a bit too much, I'll try my best to keep chapters coming in at least every week and a half.

Enjoy the chapter!

Nightwing sends the call out to the others and scrambles down the stairs. For all his acrobatic grace, he almost stumbles several times in his desperation to reach his brother's side. He needs to make sure whether Tim is merely unconscious or…the alternative. There's a worrying amount of blood pooled at Tim's feet, and Nightwing can see more blood and bruises on him than unmarred skin. His heart twists, breath catching in his throat as his fingers seek out a pulse. The heartbeat he finds is weak and fluttery, but it's also the most *beautiful* rhythm. He's alive. That's all that matters.

Nightwing flicks the whiteout lenses on his domino mask up, in the hope that, if Tim regains consciousness before they get him back to the Cave, he'll find some small comfort in being able to see his eyes. A quiet voice in the back of his head, sounding suspiciously like Hawthorne, asks if he really thinks Dick will be more of a comfort than Nightwing. He buries the thought with a ruthless denial as he takes off a glove and presses a bare hand to Tim's face. His breathing is labored, and the feverish heat radiating from his skin confirms an illness.

Heavy footsteps sound from above him, and he turns to flash a quick smile at Batman as he descends the stairs. Dick moves his gentle touch

from Tim's cheek to his hair, fingers carding through the strands, greasy from sweat and blood. Batman immediately gets to work picking the locks on the shackles holding Tim's wrists in place above his head.

"Hood?" Dick asks, without looking away from his little brother's face.

"Searching the house for Red Robin's gear. Be ready to support his weight," he says. Dick hums in acknowledgement, but before they have a chance to free him, Tim jerks like he's been burned, like Dick's hold on him is a brand against his skin, startling awake. His eyes cast about, unseeing, lost in a haze of fever and pain.

"Hey, hey hey, Timmy, it's okay. It's just me and B," Dick says. He's well aware that the voice he's using is the same one he always used with Zitka the elephant, whenever something spooked her, back in his circus days. He makes a soft shushing sound, and Tim's eyes finally focus on his face.

"No, no," he says in a pitiful, broken croak. Dick can't tell if the broken shards of glass in the sound is from coughing or screaming. He wishes he could soothe it away, smooth it back out into Tim's normal, soft voice. "This isn't real. Delirium or hallucinogens, maybe just the concussion..." Tim's words slur together a bit, and they break Dick's heart.

"We're right here, Timmy. You're not hallucinating. You're safe now. We've got you, and it's okay." The dam breaks and platitudes spill from him as he continues to comb out the tangles in Tim's hair. Tim shakes his head, insistent.

"No, you wouldn't bother. You *can't* be real," Tim says. His gaze slips away from Dick's, falling to the floor and the blood brushing against

his toes. “I’m not the Robin anyone ever wanted, anyways.” He sighs, and Dick makes a sound like a wounded animal. He’d reel back in shock and hurt, but he refuses to put any distance between them right now.

“Oh, little brother,” Dick breathes. Tim frowns, looking up at him with confusion bright in those pale eyes. Whether it’s from the fever or genuine doubt, he can’t determine. Either way, the sight of it makes his breath catch and stutter out of him.

“I’m no one’s brother,” Tim says simply. “I mean, Dick, Jay, and Dami are *my* brothers, but I’m not *theirs.* I was just there until the Robin they wanted came along. Then they threw me out because I served my purpose, and they didn’t need me anymore. I was only a temporary necessity.”

Dick wants to scream and break bone. He wants to storm the GCPD Headquarters and throttle Dorian Hawthorne. Tim is just so hurt, and Dick is *scared.* He’s so scared, because he doesn’t know how much of this is what Tim really believes. Tim starts talking again, babbling, really. The words pour out of him, fumbling and ragged.

“I’m not family, not a priority. They have better things to do than notice that I’m gone.” His eyes seem to sweep past Dick’s skin, right down to the very heart of him. Tim’s gaze has always been sharp—brimming with that relentless intelligence of his—but it’s never quite felt like the edge of a razor before now.

“Of course you’re a priority. Always,” Dick says, throat tight. His heart shreds into ribbons under the weight of those eyes, and he can’t stop the sob that tears its way through his chest. Tim doesn’t give any indication that he understands the words.

“I’m a ghost to them, now. More dead than Jay ever was, I think. Even

when he was gone, he was still there, you know? Present. Everyone still loved and missed him and never stopped. I'm just a living ghost. Like shadow and smoke."

"That's not true," Dick replies, voice taking on a pleading, hysterical lilt. He's not sure if he even believes it, not with how they'd brushed Tim aside and just let him slip away, unnoticed. Like a shadow at daybreak. Smoke drifting and curling in the wind.

Tim hums noncommittally as Batman finally frees him from the restraints. Tim slumps against Dick's chest, cheek pressed against the blue Nightwing emblem. Dick and Batman exchange a glance, an entire conversation passing between them within the span of a second. Batman puts a hand on his shoulder, squeezing once, and he reaches for Dick's mask. A moment later, the whiteouts slide back down over his eyes. Nightwing scoops Tim up, mindful of his injuries, but he still lets out a stifled sob at the flare of pain the movement brings.

"Ow, fuck," he mutters. He leans his head against Nightwing's shoulder, forehead pressed against the crook of his neck. His fingers curl around the material of the suit with all the strength of a kitten as they slowly make their way back up the stairs and out to the street.

Hood's already waiting for them at the Batmobile, which Batman had apparently already called to their location. He leans against the car with Red's equipment gathered in his arms. He glances up when he hears their approach, and his spine straightens, muscles tensing at the sight of them. Hood moves to open the door for them and helps maneuver Tim's prone body into the backseat of the Batmobile.

Hood tosses Red's gear into the passenger seat and climbs into the car, taking hold of Tim's legs and setting them gently in his lap. Nightwing follows, resting Tim's head against his thighs. His eyes flutter back open. He's barely able to summon the energy to do that much, but he's clinging to consciousness with a white-knuckled grip.

“You with us?” Jason asks, removing his helmet and domino. “C’mon kid, look at me.” He waits until Tim’s eyes slide over to his face, and he smiles, far more gently than Dick’s seen on him in years. “There ya are. Thought I told ya we’ve gotta stop meetin’ like this, yeah?” Jason’s hands curl around Tim’s calves, thumbs idly circling in a soothing pattern.

“Mm, sorry Jay,” Tim murmurs, and Jason winces at the hoarse sound of his voice. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll try not to die this time, okay?” He looks between them, not even noticing as Batman joins them and starts the car. “This is nice. I’m glad I get to pretend for a little while.”

“Pretend?” Jay asks slowly, like he already knows but doesn’t want to hear the answer.

“Yeah, isn’t that what you call me, anyways? Pretender.” Jason cringes, expression shifting to pull back the curtains of worry to let remorse show through. “This is all in my head, right? So I think it’s okay to let myself feel like the people I love actually care about me in return. Just for a little longer...” Tim lets out a little sigh and trails off, finally losing the battle with the heavy pull of unconsciousness. He passes out, head lolling to the side, face pressing against Dick’s stomach.

Dick’s chest aches, worse than any broken rib. He feels cracked open and raw, and the salt against his lips makes him realize that he’s still crying. Tears mingle with the blood on Tim’s face as they fall, streaking down his cheeks. Jason’s hand on his shoulder makes him look up. His brother’s eyes are still fierce, deadly intent lurking in their depths—blue polluted with the green of the Lazarus Pit.

“You aren’t losin’ another brother, Dickie.”

Jason is so different from the kid he was, from the person he could've grown up to be. It still takes his breath away, sometimes, looking into his little brother's face. He's *alive,* and Dick is so, so incredibly grateful for that, but he wishes things could be different. He's still Jason—all rough edges and the smell of cigarettes and dry humor—but the insanity that clings to the edges of his mind serves as a bitter reminder. Dick's already failed one brother, and they're only just now finding their footing again. He can't afford to let Tim fall further than he already has.

"We might've already lost him," Dick says softly. Jason shrugs, but he can see the anger still roiling underneath the surface of his brother's skin.

"Fuck, Dickie, I'm so fuckin' mad right now." He lets out a heavy sigh and scrubs a hand over his face. He closes his eyes, and Dick can hear his breathing shift as he tries to calm himself down. "God, just *look* at the kid. I wanna find the bastard who did this to him and make him *pay,* but Baby Bird doesn't need my anger, right now." His free hand trembles as he rakes it through his hair. The other still rests on Tim's calf. "He needs us to keep our shit together, so we can *fix this."*

"You didn't even hear the worst of it, Jay. If he really believes everything he was saying, then I'm not sure if we *can* fix it."

"We owe it to him to try, yeah?" Jason raises a brow at his older brother—a challenge. Dick nods, his smile forced and wobbly, but present, all the same.

"Once we make sure he's stable, we can determine the best way to bring Tim back into the family," Bruce interjects, startling the two boys in the back. "I hadn't realized he'd drifted so far from us." They all stay quiet for a moment before Bruce says, "Tim said something to you, Jay, that I was hoping you would clarify." Jason nods, and

Bruce's grip on the steering wheel tightens. "What did he mean when he said he'd 'try not to die this time'?"

"He, ah, he flatlined, that time I helped him." Jason looks down at Tim, expression dark. "I got him back, but yeah. He died, technically."

Dick bites his lip, shoulders shaking as a fresh wave of tears starts to fall. Bruce's face is grim and ashen. Tim *died,* and they hadn't known. He'd called for help, and they hadn't answered his distress signal. Guilt churns in his stomach, and Dick wonders where he was and what he was doing that day. Why hadn't he helped? He'll look into it later, once he knows Tim will be okay.

The Batmobile speeds into the Cave, and as soon as it comes to a stop, Bruce is out of the car and moving to open the door for Dick. He clambers out, cradling Tim close. He passes his little brother into Bruce's waiting arms and watches as they rush to the medbay. Alfred and Stephanie are already there to look after Tim, so Dick stands awkwardly by the Batmobile, feeling lost. He needs something to distract him.

Dick turns to look at Jason, who's already heading for his workbench, red helmet tucked under one arm. He removes his gear and starts the process of cleaning his guns. He must feel Dick's eyes on him, because without turning around, he reaches for the hoodie hanging over the back of his chair and tosses it at Dick's face.

"Get out of here, Dickie," he says, still focused on his weapons. "Take a shower or somethin', rather than standing there like a useless fuckin' moron." Numbly, Dick nods and follows his advice, stumbling toward the showers.

Once he's fully shed Nightwing and changed into an old pair of

sweatpants and his brother's hoodie, Dick wanders back into the Cave. He finds Damian curled up in the chair in front of the Batcomputer, staring blankly at the screen. Dick moves to ruffle his hair, but his hand gets swatted back.

"Grayson," Damian says in a biting tone. "Do not test my patience." He looks up at Dick with a scowl, but he can see the undertones of worry in his young face. Dick frowns and leans against the console, facing his youngest brother.

"Hey Dami," he says, voice low and gentle. "You okay?"

"Fine," he snaps. "I'm not the one injured." Dick smiles at him, eyes soft. He reaches out again, and this time, Damian doesn't push him away when he wraps an arm around his shoulders. Damian's sour expression doesn't change, but he leans into the hug and buries his face in the material of the oversized hoodie. "Will Drake be alright?" He asks, voice muffled.

"Timmy's going to be just fine," Dick soothes. "C'mon kiddo, why don't we go upstairs? We can make some hot chocolate and tea for everyone." Damian nods and reaches for his crutches.

They amble upstairs and into the kitchen. Dick starts on the hot chocolate for himself and Stephanie, and Damian fills the kettle. He rifles through the cupboard to find the chai tea leaves—his favorite. Dick selects some of their ugliest novelty mugs, matching each one to a different family member.

Once the drinks are ready, Damian tells him to go ahead, so Dick goes back down to the Cave with the tray of six mugs by himself. He sets the two for him and Damian on his workbench and goes to give Jason his drink. Jason takes it with a nod and a grunt of thanks. Bruce, Steph, and Alfred are still in the medbay with Tim. He casts a nervous

glance toward the doors, and when he turns back to his brother, Jason rolls his eyes. He stands up and pulls him into a hug. Dick melts into it, exhausted and anxious. He closes his eyes for a moment and wraps his arms around Jason.

"Ya look like a fuckin' kicked puppy," Jason says, resting his chin atop Dick's head. Part of him wants to defend himself, but he decides to just snuggle closer instead.

Damian comes back a few minutes later, with a bundle of clothes tossed over his shoulder. Dick recognizes his favorite sweatshirt, an old, faded Wonder Woman t-shirt, and some plaid pajama pants. He raises a brow at his youngest brother, a silent question.

"Clothes for Drake," Damian explains primly. "He'll be more comfortable in these. I took them from your room, Grayson, as you're the closest to his size."

"Holy shit," Jason says with a guffaw. "Demon Brat grew a heart!" Damian sends him a withering glare, but Jason just grins crookedly at him. Damian's retort gets cut off by the sound of the medbay doors opening. Steph walks out, yawning.

"He's stable," she mumbles, smiling sleepily. She grabs the eggplant-colored mug of hot chocolate and takes a long swig. "I'm going upstairs. It's naptime." She waves and stumbles over toward the stairs, just as Bruce and Alfred make their way over. Bruce picks up his mug and takes a sip.

"This isn't coffee," he says, frowning. Jason snorts, and Dick grins at the sight of Alfred's unimpressed look. Bruce just sighs, ignoring them. "Tim is going to be alright. However, given what we heard from him tonight, I don't think he should wake up alone. He should have someone with him, or else we run the risk of reinforcing his belief in

his place with us."

"I'll take first watch," Dick says immediately. He wants to be at his little brother's side as soon as he can. Bruce nods once.

"The rest of you, go get some sleep. It's been a long night." The others grumble a bit but acquiesce. Alfred ushers Jason and Damian back upstairs, into the manor, leaving only Bruce and Dick down in the Cave. As soon as they're alone, Dick turns to his mentor.

"You're going to watch the rest of that footage, aren't you?" Dick says.

"I am."

Dick purses his lips but doesn't reply. Bruce pats him on the shoulder and heads for the Batcomputer, and Dick goes to the medbay. He sits at Tim's bedside and takes his hand. Tim looks entirely too pale, and the dark shadows under his eyes are telling. He's thin, swathed in bandages, and he just looks so *small.* He's hooked up to several different vitals monitors, as well as an IV drip. Dick brushes his thumb against Tim's knuckles. He wonders when his little brother will wake up.

He knows Bruce has started the video of Tim's captivity when the screaming starts to echo around the Cave. Dick tries to drown out the sound, focusing on the beep of the heart monitor next to him. Tim's here, and he's alive. Dick repeats the thought over and over in his head, until he thinks he starts to believe it. All the while, Tim's screams carve deep gouges into his heart.

It goes on for *hours,* and when Bruce reenters the medbay, looking more haunted than he has since Jason's death, Dick is almost frantic

in reaching out. He makes grabby hands in his adoptive father's direction, and as Bruce sits down next to him, he puts a heavily calloused hand in Dick's and wraps his free arm around his shoulders. Dick leans against him, soaking in as much comfort from the contact as he can. He holds on to Bruce and Tim with all the desperation of a dying man.

"Do you think we can make things better?" Dick asks, after a moment. He sounds small, like that little Robin from a lifetime ago. Bruce sighs and rests his head against his.

"I don't know, Dick. But we have to try."

Two Brothers, Two Brothers

Chapter Summary

Conversations between brothers

For all his arrogance, there are times when Damian seems painfully young. Long after Bruce gives Dick one last pat on the shoulder and heads upstairs for the night, Damian wanders back down to the Batcave. He's in his pajamas, and he's wearing a pair of ridiculous, fluffy socks Jason gave him for his last birthday. He should've been asleep hours ago, but he slips instead into the chair next to Dick's and curls his legs underneath him, leaning into his brother's side.

"Hi there, kiddo," Dick says softly. "Shouldn't you be asleep? You've got school tomorrow." Damian looks up at him and scoffs.

"Don't patronize me, Grayson. I'm perfectly capable of attending classes without having slept an optimal amount." He narrows his eyes at Dick. "I'm not the one you should be pushing your concerns on, regardless." Dick flinches back a little, an expression of hurt crossing his face. Damian stares at him, unrepentant. "You know it's the truth," he insists. "You're worried about Drake, so you're acting overly attentive toward the rest of us. Should he not be the one you spend your time doting on?"

Dick pauses, a retort resting against the backs of his teeth. He runs a hand through his curls, tugging lightly at the strands. He doesn't know what to say to that. A soft huff pulls him from his thoughts. Damian watches him with that steady, certain gaze, and it dissolves Dick's composure. He closes his eyes to escape the weight of it.

"You're right," Dick says, after a moment of stifling quiet. "I'll try to tone it down. It's just been a rough night, and it's got me feeling unbalanced."

“I heard what Drake said,” Damian admits, “in the Batmobile. The comm line was open. Does he truly believe his familial ties with us are one-sided?”

“He was pretty out of it,” Dick says, biting his lip. It’s a question he’s been agonizing over for hours now. “I honestly can’t be sure how much of it he meant, but I do think he was just finally speaking his mind. His verbal filter was pretty much gone, at that point.”

“He could’ve died,” Damian murmurs. His face is carefully blank, neutral like Dick hasn’t seen in him in a long time. “He would’ve died thinking we would be indifferent to it. He already has, once.” There’s something hesitant in his tone, and it strikes Dick just how upset Damian must be. “I’ve been unkind to him.”

“Oh, Dami,” Dick says, voice going quiet and sad. “We’ve all messed up with Tim. I just hope he’s willing to give us a chance to make it up to him.”

“I didn’t understand.” Damian’s hands curl into fists, and he looks up at Dick with uncertainty and grief in his eyes. “It took me so *long* to truly realize I was wrong about him. I saw him only as a threat to me, to my place at my father’s side. He was willing to welcome me, but I tried to kill him.”

“All you knew back then was what the League taught you,” Dick soothes. He wraps an arm around his brother’s shoulder, pulling him close.

“I was rewarded for it,” Damian says. “At the time, I believed you agreed with me that Drake had no place with us. I thought you finally saw reason, and that you gave me Robin because I was the superior choice. But then, you taught me how a proper family should act.” He glances up at Dick and curls into the hug. “I hurt him, and I damaged

your relationship with him, too."

"Hey," Dick says, pulling back a little to make sure Damian meets his eyes. "You're not responsible for what happened with me and Tim. That's between the two of us. Yes, you made mistakes with him, but owning up to those mistakes takes a lot of courage. I'm proud of you, kiddo."

He smiles at his baby brother, warmth and pride blanketing his features with a softness that eases the lines of stress and worry on his face, and Damian locks his arms around his torso, burying his face in Dick's shirt.

"Do you think Timothy will allow me to be his brother?" He asks. Dick's heart doesn't know whether to break at the fragility of the question or to glow with affection.

"I do," he says, finally. "You're a really great kid, Damian. Tim already sees you as his brother. We just have to show him that he's *your* brother too."

"And yours," Damian adds. Dick sighs and leans his head against his brother's.

"I'm not so sure he'll want to give me another chance. I really screwed things up. It's going to take a long time to earn his trust back, if he lets me. I kept trying to reach out, to spend time together and get things back to normal, but he's never let me try to make it up to him. God, I don't even know what normal *is* anymore."

"He might believe you merely intend to gloss over the rift between the two of you."

“Yeah, casual hangouts aren’t really the best way to have serious talks.” Dick frowns for a moment. “Wait, there *was* that one time he offered to meet up.” He looks horror stricken and a little ill as the realization settles in. “Oh no, he probably meant to patch things up then, on his terms, and I totally blew him off! Augh, what was I *thinking?”*

“What happened?”

“Well it was weird because he called from his line at WE, and I—”

“Timothy records the calls from his office, yes?” Dick’s eyes light up, and he ruffles Damian's hair.

“That’s right! Good thinking, Dami! We can look up the record for an outgoing call to my phone and listen to the transcript. That way, we can make sure I’m not forgetting anything. Let me just ask Babs to find the audio file on Tim’s computer.”

He taps out a text and sends it off to Barbara. A few minutes later, he gets her response and the attached audio. Dick grins and thanks her. He appreciates that even though Barbara is probably *royally pissed* at them for not noticing Tim’s disappearance, she’s still willing to help them make things right. Dick opens the file and sets it to play. There’s ringing, followed by a click as the call is answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi Dick, it’s Tim.”

“Timmy! It’s been a while, little brother. What’s up?”

“Well…” There's an awkward pause over the line. “Would you like to spend some time together this afternoon?”

“Sorry Timmy, but I’m actually going to the zoo with Damian today. They’ve apparently gotten a new penguin exhibit! We got tickets for the grand opening the minute they started selling them. He’s been really excited about this for weeks.”

“Oh, well maybe I could join—” He’s interrupted by the sound of an impatient Damian calling out to Dick, as well as the loud response.

“I’ll be downstairs in a second! I just have to get my shoes!” Dick’s voice returns to a normal volume as he says, “I’ve gotta go, but we’ll talk later, okay?”

“Yeah…okay,” Tim says softly. “Bye, Dick.”

He hangs up before he can receive a reply. Dick studies the screen for a moment, and after a moment, his face pales. He drops his phone onto his lap and buries his face in his hands. Damian freezes, startled, at the wretched sob that wracks Dick’s frame.

“Grayson,” he says softly, reaching out to put an uncertain hand on his shoulder. “I understand that this has been an overwhelming night for you. Perhaps this was too much, too soon.”

“No,” Dick chokes out, voice broken up around his heart in his throat. He looks up at Damian, tears streaking down his cheeks. He picks up the phone and turns the screen toward his brother’s face. “Read the

date.”

“Oh.”

Dick doesn’t respond. He just curls in on himself and cries.

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The next morning, Jason ambles downstairs and sees Damian asleep in Dick’s lap. Dick’s eyes are red-rimmed and shadowed. One hand rests on Damian’s shoulder, and the other clutches Tim’s fingers in an iron grip.

“Hey Big Wing,” Jason greets, smiling sadly at his older brother. The empty look he’s greeted with sends a chill down his spine. “Alfie made cinnamon rolls. He’s callin’ an emergency family meetin’, so you and the Demon should get upstairs.”

“But someone needs to stay with Tim,” Dick protests in a weak croak.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll watch the kid for ya while the rest of the family has a sit down. Good fuckin’ luck with Operation: Grovel like Hell.” Jason grins crookedly at him. “I won’t miss out. Besides, I already know what my job is, here. I’m flyin’ to San Fran in the mornin’.”

“The Titans?” Dick asks. Damian begins to stir, lifting his head and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“Yeah, they’re gonna be *so* pissed Baby Bird got himself in trouble

again. Besides," he says with a casual shrug, "I've got experience breakin' into the Tower." He snickers at the dumbfounded expression on Dick's face. "Go on up. Don't wanna keep Alfie waiting, yeah?"

Dick yawns as he stands. Damian's already crossed the room, waiting impatiently at the door. Dick ruffles Jason's hair as he passes, though the gesture seems more automatic—force of habit—than conscious. Jason moves to the chair his older brother vacated and sits down, propping his feet up on the bed, next to Tim's legs. He opens the book he'd snagged from the manor's library on the way downstairs and settles in.

His attention stays split between the book, the unconscious teenager, and his family's plotting going on upstairs. Every few minutes, his gaze shifts from the lines of text on yellowed pages to his little brother's pale and drawn face. His lungs rattle with each breath, and the clothes Damian brought him hang off his frame. Jason sighs. The sight of Tim so injured is uncomfortably familiar. He's been the cause of too many of those instances.

The thought still aches, somewhere deep in his chest. Ever since he'd detoxed from the poisonous haze of the Lazarus Pit, he's felt wary around Tim. He doesn't hate him, not now that his mind isn't clouded by rage and insanity and betrayal. He just knows he doesn't deserve any forgiveness from his successor. He doesn't deserve it from *anyone* in his family, but he'd treated Tim with the same brutality he usually only reserves for the worst criminals.

He hadn't deserved any of it.

They've made amends, sure, and they've even worked together a few times since Jason helped him out that one awful night. Still, he hangs on to his guilt, determined to find a way to make it up to him—somehow, someday. He'll figure it out.

A quiet groan snaps him out of his thoughts. Jason sets his book aside and takes Tim's hand, studying his face carefully. Slowly, he begins to stir, drawn out from under the heavy weight of unconsciousness. Jason lets out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Tim's nose scrunches up, brows furrowed. His fingers twitch and curl around Jason's.

"Jay?" Tim blinks up at him, hazy and unfocused. "Not a dream?"

"Hey Timbit," Jason says, letting the relief he feels bleed into his voice. "Nah, not a dream. We found ya last night. Damn near tore the city apart trackin' ya down."

"You...what?" He's confused, and Jason wonders if it's the painkillers or the fever that has yet to break. He brushes his thumb across Tim's knuckles. He's not sure how much to explain, so he settles for a brief overview.

"Some asshole—former gang member ya took down a few years ago—had ya for a while. We gotcha back, though. The guy's in jail already, so it's all good." He watches as Tim's expression shifts into one of startling clarity.

"Shit, *shit,"* Tim says, moving to stand up. Jason puts a hand on his shoulder to hold him in place. Tim's eyes flash with something akin to panic. His thin fingers wrap around Jason's wrist, and his lungs let out a stuttered wheeze.

"Hey, relax kid," Jason says, keeping his voice soft. "What's gotcha so spooked?"

"He's not just a small-time criminal, Jay. He's a highly trained mercenary, and he wants to torture me until I either agree to become

his apprentice or die."

"Why the fuck is a mercenary after you?" Jason growls, a fierce wave of protectiveness sweeping over him. "I'll fuckin' kill him."

"His employers want me dead." Tim frowns, and Jason helps prop him up in bed and sits down, facing him. He stays quiet, watching, amused, as the wheels in Tim's brain whir at a breakneck pace. "You said he was arrested?"

"Yeah," Jason says. "He's the one who told us he had ya. Dunno why he'd do that, though."

"Fuck, that makes sense. He said something about setting a contingency into motion, the last time I saw him. They must have realized he hadn't killed me, so he let himself get arrested before they had a chance to mobilize against him or find me. He knew you'd track me down before the Horsemen could."

"So he got himself arrested just so he could let us find ya?"

"He's not done with me yet," Tim says softly. His pale eyes are wide, scared. He struggles to take a full breath, but it dissolves into a heaving cough.

"Don't worry, Baby Bird," Jason says, patting his back awkwardly. "It'll be fine. We're all watchin' out for ya. For now, just focus on gettin' better. Ya look like shit, kid."

"Gee, thanks." Tim scowls at him without any malice, and Jason just leans over and ruffles his hair in response. "How bad is it, this time?"

He asks with a sigh.

“Well, it’s not good,” Jason says with a grimace. “But ya didn’t die, so that’s an improvement from last time. Fucker carved ya up somethin’ bad, and that fever isn’t doin’ your ass any favors. Broken ankle, some broken ribs, too, and your shoulders are fucked. The stab wound in your side’s the worst of it.” Tim nods, lips pursed.

“It could be worse,” he offers. He starts to shrug, but the motion makes him wince.

“Could be, yeah. Still shitty, though,” Jason says. “You’ll be sidelined for a hot fuckin’ minute.” Tim’s mouth twists into a displeased pout, but he doesn’t argue. Jason’s expression softens. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“Yeah.” Tim sighs, the sound coming out garbled from his damaged lungs. His eyelids begin to droop, and he reaches out to tug at Jason’s sleeve. Jason raises a brow at his half-asleep little brother, confused. Tim bites back a yawn.

“Need anythin’?”

“No, just don’t tell the others I’m awake,” he says, leveling a severe look at his brother. Jason snorts. Tim grumbles something unintelligible, and Jason shakes his head, a wry smile curling the corners of his mouth. “Or I might just have to fall asleep before you get a chance to, so they’ll all think you’re a rotten *liar.”*

There’s something hesitant in his tone, and he stumbles over his words when he mentions falling asleep. Jason takes a moment to puzzle out what Tim’s probably thinking. The answer strikes him when Tim shakes himself back awake. Nightmares. Falling asleep—only to relive

the last five days of hell he'd gone through, and then to wake up not knowing whether the torture or the safety is real—must be terrifying to him.

"Scoot over a little," he says, after watching Tim's lost expression and coming to a decision. He follows Jason's instructions with sluggish coordination. Jason moves to sit next to him, long legs stretched out in front of him on top of the blankets. "C'mere," he says, extending an arm. Tim practically collapses against him, and Jason wraps his arm around his bony shoulders. Tim mumbles sleepily, and then his uneven breathing slows.

Jason knows he doesn't deserve Tim's forgiveness, but he's thankful that Tim is willing to trust him with this. Closeness and comfort aren't his forte, but he wants to do what he can for the kid asleep on his shoulder. Jason's free hand wraps around Tim's wrist, fingertips resting against his pulse point. The thrumming of his heart is thready, but it's *there*.

For now, it's enough.

Break In/Out

Chapter Summary

The Titans come to Gotham

Tim's upgraded the Tower's security since the last time Jason broke in, but Jason's notoriously stubborn. He focuses on disarming the first series of alarms, hands steady as they move over Tim's complex system. Tim rivals *Bruce* in his level of paranoia; seriously, who puts traps in the air ducts? He manages to hack into the first of several layers of access codes, sighing as he begins the tedious process of dismantling the biometric scanner.

He landed the Batwing he'd borrowed from Bruce nearby, but not close enough to alert Tim's team to his presence. He doesn't want to pass up the opportunity to screw with them, just a little. Alfred had at least talked him out of bringing along the can of red spray paint he'd bought, for old time's sake. He doesn't want to piss off the Titans *that* much.

Jason finally manages to access the building, a triumphant grin on his face, mixed with a boyish cockiness that belongs better on the face of the little Robin who'd been buried long ago. He moves toward the elevator and presses the button for the communal floor. Sure, he wants to annoy the Titans by proving he can still break into their Tower, but he's here on serious business.

The doors open to reveal a stern-faced Superboy, with Kid Flash and Wonder Girl both flanking him. Jason sighs and holds his hands up in an innocent sort of gesture.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Superboy snarls, taking a step forward. He can't exactly loom over Jason, but the coldness in his expression definitely helps with the intimidation factor. Well, it would on anyone not raised by the Bat, at least.

A flash of irritation runs through him. Admittedly, he's still annoyed over the events of yesterday—dozing off with his little brother tucked under his arm, only to wake up with *Bruce,* of all people, watching them with that intense, emotionally stunted look in his eye. And sure, Jason can't *really* complain, because in their messed up family, creeping is caring. Of course, that didn't stop him from scowling at Bruce and arguing with him in hushed tones about the sanctity of sleeping without the full force of the *Batdad stare* disturbing the peace.

He scowls, trying to rein in his temper. They have every reason to be suspicious of him, but he's frustrated by it, regardless.

"Little Red's hurt. I'm here to take your team to Gotham, because the kid needs people there for him—people who he actually trusts to give a shit about him. Right now, that's not any of the Bats."

"What happened?" Wonder Girl asks, slightly frantic. The closed-off mask slips to reveal the girl underneath the hero persona. "Is he alright?"

"He's in rough shape, but he's stable. His fuckin' fever spiked again overnight, though. Turns out none of the family knew the kid's missin' his fuckin' spleen." Jason scoffs, shaking his head. "At least they've got his dose of meds up, now."

"Oh, and *you* knew?" Kon asks, folding his arms. He still doesn't look pleased, but his expression isn't hostile anymore.

"Fuck yeah, I knew. Patched him up once, when he got himself into some deep shit. Had to make sure the dumbass didn't go septic," Jason says with a shrug. He studies the suspicious faces and rakes a hand

through his hair, fingers snagging on the white streak in his bangs. He huffs a frustrated breath.

“You didn’t answer my other question,” Cassie reminds him.

“Tim always manages to get himself into the most ridiculous trouble,” Bart says with a fond, exasperated grin. “He’s really okay, though?” He turns to Jason, and the full force of the doe-eyes on the kid is enough to make even the Red Hood soften.

“He’ll be alright. Hell, I’d bet he’s already gonna be tryin’ to sneak work on his cases by the time we get back. Stubborn kid.”

“You sound like you actually give a damn,” Kon says, still frowning at him. “Last time I checked, you’d stabbed him and left him for dead.”

Jason cringes at the memory. He shifts uncomfortably, scratching at the back of his neck. God, he’d thought he’d actually *killed* Tim. He’d been so *pleased* with himself. He can recall—all too clearly—the sight of the blood slicking his gauntlets, the feeling of the Batarang sinking into his brother’s chest, the gruesome smile gracing his features at the sight of Tim lying so *still.* It makes him sick, still lingers in his nightmares.

Join me. Be my Robin.

A wave of nausea rolls against his stomach. Jason closes his eyes, trying to silence the sound of his own voice saturated with bloodlust. The memory of Tim curled up against him, trusting him enough to let himself rest, comes to mind. It helps shake off the shadows clawing at Jason’s mind, crooning to him in the siren song of the Lazarus Pit. He takes a breath to steady himself. He’s not that person, not anymore, and he’ll be *damned* before he lets himself hurt his brother again.

“Look,” he says, after a long pause, “I know Tim deserves better than my fucked up *bullshit,* but he’s got me, anyways. I’m not here to ask ya for forgiveness.” He looks directly at Kon, meeting his cold glare with a steady look of his own. “That’s up to Tim to give. I’m just here because I know he’ll want ya there, and you’ll wanna be there.”

“Fine,” Kon grumbles. “But don’t expect me to trust you. If you try *anything* against him again, I swear, I’ll tear you apart myself.” Jason nods in acceptance, and the three Titans seem to relax minutely. They’re still on edge with worry, but hopefully his reassurances and their desire to help Tim will outweigh their animosity toward him.

“Tim was kidnapped last week by a mercenary. Guy used to be part of a gang Young Justice took down, years back. He’s got an obsession with Baby Bird, now. He spent five days torturin’ him, before turnin’ himself in. That’s how we found out the kid was gone.”

“Five days?” Bart asks, voice small.

“Oh, Tim, *no,"* Cassie says, hand clasped over her mouth. Her free hand reaches out to clutch Bart’s. “No one even *noticed* he was missing?”

“We’re getting him the *fuck* out of there and back home. I don’t care what Batman has to say about it.” Jason raises a brow, and Kon scoffs. “Come on. Tim deserves to be with his family. As far as we’re concerned, that’s *us,* not the guys who only remember he exists when they need something from him.”

“I get it, but we wanna keep him in Gotham while he recovers, so we can help him out—however much he lets us. The Bats know now that things with the kid are all sorts of fucked up, and we just wanna show

him he still has family with us, too."

"When do we leave?" Kon asks, voice steely. His hands curl into tight fists at his sides.

"The two of you, grab your go-bags," Cassie says, voice steady despite the heartbroken look in her eyes. "I'll ask Gar and Rave to keep things under control here. I don't want to put them in the middle of this."

"Yeah," Bart agrees, wrinkling his nose. "They're still friendly with Dick and all, but I don't think it'll be easy for them to stay neutral right now." The three Titans exchange determined nods and split up, leaving Jason still standing in front of the elevator.

Jason sighs, fingers twitching. He wishes he hadn't come in civvies, but he hadn't wanted to set the Titans on an even finer edge by dealing with the Red Hood. He's still got his leather jacket and his kris dagger with him, but he aches for the familiar weight of his pistols. He feels off-center without them, more anxious. He breathes and fights the feeling. Anxiety makes his knuckles itch for a fight, and from there, it's an easy fall into the anger humming underneath his skin. He has to keep himself in check.

Just as he's considering smoking a cigarette to calm his nerves, Bart returns, duffel bag slung over one shoulder and a nervous smile on his face. He's closely followed by Kon, and then Cassie joins them a little while later. Jason leads the way out to where he landed the plane, and the four of them board in stifled silence.

**

When Tim opens his eyes, he has two thoughts: *oh fuck, that hurts* and *thank goodness I'm alone this time.* He breathes out a sigh of relief, but

it quickly melts into a cough. Cringing, he struggles to prop himself up on his elbows, glancing around. The Batcave is blessedly empty, and the gears in his head are already turning, forming a plan for Tim to get *out* before anyone realizes he's awake.

He spots his belongings on a workbench in the main area of the Cave. The suit is definitely in tatters, but the rest of his gear should be salvageable. He's honestly a little surprised Alfred hasn't burned the ruined uniform yet. Tim heaves as deep a breath as he can manage with his aching lungs and carefully stands up, mindful of his broken ankle. He sways, grabbing onto the edge of the bed to steady himself, but he definitely feels more like a functional human than he did the first time he woke up. And this time, there's no Jason there to stop him from getting away before subjecting himself to any of the others.

His memories of his rescue and what came after are hazy, but Tim has a feeling some conversations will be had—conversations he'd like to avoid for the foreseeable *forever,* thank you very much. He makes a mental note to hack into the archive of the cowl footage from that night, just so he can refine his contingencies for dealing with the fallout from whatever he let slip.

Tim disengages the medical monitoring equipment with practiced hands. He moves to the table with his gear, snagging a backpack from one of the other workstations as he passes—Jason's, if the disassembled assault rifle and the scattered ammunition is any indication. He packs up his equipment and tracks down the keys to an unmarked motorcycle he can use without being linked to the Bats. The sound of the engine roaring to life echoes against the walls of the Cave, and Tim doesn't look back as he drives off.

He doesn't want to think about what the others would've done, once they realized he's awake. He'd rather leave on his own terms, rather than being tossed out the second he stepped away from the threshold of death's door.

He won't let himself see the distrust and disappointment in Bruce's eyes. Since the Captain Boomerang incident, Bruce has seen Tim as more of a potential threat than an ally. Sure, Damian and Jason have *actually* taken lives, but he's the one under the heaviest scrutiny. It stings, even though he knows it shouldn't. He's not Batman's partner, not Bruce's son, not anyone *chosen* to be in the man's life. Ra's has told him several times now that Bruce sees in him potential to become his most dangerous adversary. Of course, Tim always cheerfully tells Ra's he's full of shit, but sometimes, the thought does linger. How many plans does Bruce have in place to take Tim down, if he feels the need to?

It's funny how Batman thinks he's capable of playing God with people's lives, but Robin sees him only as a worthless imposter. Tim can practically *hear* Damian's jeering in the back of his head, calling him a pathetic waste of space for screwing up and getting himself captured, telling him he should've shown them the *courtesy* of letting Thanatos finish him off. It's nothing he hasn't heard before, regardless. The kid has never spoken a kind word to Tim, making it more than clear just how unwelcome he is at the manor. He used to think it was his home, but it isn't safe for him there, anymore. No one had protested when Damian verbally tore into him and physically attacked him until he understood his place and left. No one should have to humor the interloper too ignorant to understand he isn't wanted.

He can't let Dick try to act like nothing's wrong between them, like they're still brothers—if they ever were. At least Damian and Jason have always been honest with him. Attempted murder really speaks for itself, but Dick's affection is a weapon he wields with, if not malice, then deadly precision. Dick has always been the kindest to him, the cruelest. He let Tim think someone actually *cared,* only to stand back and let him drown in the poison sea of Damian's vitriol. Tim tried, for so long, not to let Damian get to him. He's just a spoiled, League-raised kid, after all. But what really hurt was Dick's nonchalance, his willingness to *defend* Damian and *condemn* Tim for fighting back.

Tim still hasn't told Dick about Damian cutting his line. He'll willingly admit to not wanting to know how Dick would react. Some part of

him wonders if Dick would still try to make excuses for what Damian did, but mostly, he doesn't want to hurt Dick with the weight of that knowledge. His little Robin tried to kill someone he cares about (?) the same way his own parents were murdered. The snap of a sabotaged line, that horrible, split second, suspended in time, as the Graysons hung in the air before they began to plummet, the impact, the cracking of bone. All of it has been burned into Tim's memory since he was three years old.

Dick Grayson had given little Timmy Drake his *very first hug* that day.

So, thanks, but no thanks, he's going back to his Perch. He'll spare the others the trouble of pretending they care.

He's grateful Jason had been the one with him when he woke up the first time. Their history is messy and complicated, but things between them have mellowed out since Jason saved his life, over a year ago. They'd talked it out, smoothed things over, and even though they're not exactly friends, Tim can at least trust Jason not to slit his throat...again.

Tim guides the bike into the hidden garage under his apartment and parks, leaning his forehead against the handlebars with a low groan. He sets the backpack full of his gear down and hobbles over to his computer to start up the protocol to lock down the Perch. His security is alway tight, but the extra protections turn his building into a veritable fortress. The tension eases from his shoulders once the confirmation flashes on the screen.

The door leading from the hidden operations center to the apartment opens, and Tim whirls around, reaching for the bo staff he has stashed beside the console. By the time he has the staff extended, his body dropping into a defensive stance despite protests from his injuries, there are arms wrapped around him, lifting him off the ground. Tim yelps in surprise, ready to toss the intruder away from him, but then he recognizes who's holding him.

“Kon?”

“Tim!” Kon says brightly. He sets Tim down and grins at him. “I knew you’d stage a jailbreak, you slippery little shit. Bart owes me twenty bucks.”

“Aw, no fair!” Bart whines, joining them at the bottom of the stairs. He pulls Tim into a warm hug, despite his disappointed tone at the bet’s outcome. “Good to see you, dude. How’re you feeling?”

“You want the honest answer or the one that won’t make you want to kick my ass?” Tim asks with a wry smile. Bart lets him go, pouting. Cassie immediately takes his spot, dragging Tim into yet another hug. He practically melts into the hold, overwhelmed by all the affection. It warms him down to his toes. “I missed you guys,” he says, looking between his three friends. His face kind of hurts from smiling (and the bruising).

“You scared the shit out of us,” Kon says, steadying Tim when he starts to list to the side.

“I’m alright,” Tim replies, slumping against his friend a little and closing his eyes. “Be better once we get back to San Fran.”

“You’re the one who put us on lockdown,” Cassie teases. Tim shrugs, ignoring the pull in his shoulders. “Either way, you’re stuck with us.”

“I wanted to make sure the Bats won’t have access, just in case they decide to pretend to give a shit about me.”

“Aw, Baby Bird, ya *wound* me.” Jason’s amused voice startles him. Tim blinks up at him, surprised he’s there, descending the stairs to join them. “Glad to see ya up and about, kid.” He grins, sharp and crooked, and Tim waves a hand in a lazy greeting.

“You don’t count,” Bart says. He and the others exchange grins at Jason’s mock-offended expression. “We,” he continues, gesturing to himself and his two teammates, “took a vote. You’re not included in the mantra, anymore.”

“Mantra?” Jason asks, raising a dark brow.

“The Drakes were shit. The Bats are shit, and Tim is *the* shit.” The three Titans chorus, completely in unison. Tim rolls his eyes fondly, and Jason snorts. His phone chimes, and he fishes it out from the pocket of his leather jacket.

“Anyways,” Tim says slowly, drawing out the syllables. “Lockdown can’t be lifted or reset for a full 24 hours, so we’re stuck here for now. We’ll have to leave tomorrow.” Jason looks up from reading the message on his phone. There’s something dark in his eyes, something deadly with intent. It’s a stark change from his previous demeanor.

“Sorry, but I don’t think that’s gonna happen,” he says, voice level but strained. “Dorian Hawthorne just escaped from GCPD custody.”

Lofty Ambitions

Chapter Summary

Tim makes plans

Tim becomes Red Robin in an instant, and even without the mask, Red's presence carries a sharpness to it, a sense of authority. He's still leaning against Kon for support, but he commands the room. In the blue light of the computer behind him, his face looks pale, the dark shadows against his cheekbones in stark contrast, but his eyes are focused and clear. The exhausted, injured teenager has stepped aside for the master strategist.

"The only reason Thanatos allowed himself to be caught was to prevent my death at the hands of the Horsemen. The two parties are currently at odds, due to his failure to complete his contract against me. It's unlikely he'll be using the Horsemen's money to hide out from them, so I'll have to track each bank account I can reliably link to him. That should give us insight into his movements, though I doubt he's left Gotham. We already know his target is still in the city, after all."

"So how do we want to approach this?" Cassie asks, folding her arms. Her expression is stormy, fierce with protectiveness.

"Two ways," Tim says, holding up two fingers. "First, we track him down and keep an eye on him. We need to determine what his next move will be. Second, we secure his target." He glances over to Jason, studying him with that eerie, calculating look in his pale eyes. "Should I assume you'd like to be involved?"

"Absolutely, ya should. Soon as lockdown ends, Hood's goin' out *hunting.* It's the most dangerous game, right Timbit?" A wolfish grin overtakes his face, predatory—more a flash of teeth than a real smile.

“Christ, Jason, how do you manage to make literary references menacing?”

“It’s a talent,” he replies with an easy shrug, smile slipping into something less threatening. “What about the Bats?” Jason asks.

“What about them? I doubt they’d get involved.”

“Who’d ya think told me about the breakout?”

“I don’t know,” Tim says with a shrug. “Oracle? Deathstroke, maybe?”

“Why the fuck would Deathstroke—”

“He owes me a favor,” he replies, waving off the question. Jason pinches the bridge of his nose, completely exasperated.

“It was B,” he says. “Thought that’d be obvious.”

“Anyways,” Tim continues with a casual shrug. “Once we find Thanatos, we’ll have to find out how he plans on recapturing me and just what he intends to do, if he succeeds. I doubt he’s anticipating interference from the Titans, especially considering Batman’s ‘no metas in Gotham’ rule.” He frowns, scrutinizing the group with a critical eye. “We’ll keep my team’s presence under wraps for now. That could provide an advantage against Thanatos, and if you’re not actively working in the city, Batman will be less likely to attempt to force you out.”

“B won’t make ‘em leave,” Jason says. “He knew I was gonna bring ‘em back here.” He shrugs, grinning conspiratorially. “Besides, Alfie’s the one who approved, and he can’t be overruled.”

“Fair point,” Tim concedes. He’d start pacing if Kon weren’t the only reason he’s still standing upright. “We’ll use a few methods to track him down; I’ll follow his financial transactions, which can hopefully give us an idea of what he’s planning. In the meantime, Cassie, I want you studying security footage from local banks. It’s likely he’ll want to open a new account, so he’ll need to show up in person somewhere. Kon, you’ll study traffic camera footage, starting with the time and location of his escape. I’ll pull up a list of aliases he’s used previously, and Bart, you can comb through local hotels and motels for anyone checking in under one of those names. Once we find him, we should be able to determine what vehicle he’s using or where he’s staying, which will make keeping tabs on him easier. Jason, once lockdown gets lifted, you’re free to go hunting.”

He doesn’t exactly want to order Jason around. They’re friendlier now than they’ve ever been, but Tim isn’t in charge of the Red Hood. All he can do is guide the Titans and hope Jason will be willing to offer help when they need it. Someone has to be able to move freely through the city, after all, and Tim’s team can’t do that without Batman’s interference. So far, this is the best plan he can think of.

Tim nods decisively and moves to stand without support. Kon sighs, ready to keep him upright if he starts to sway again. Jason’s phone rings, and he excuses himself, leaving them to their search while he takes the call. As his heavy footsteps against the staircase fade, a silence falls over the room. The Titans look to Tim, waiting for his next move.

“Let’s get to work,” Tim says, tone authoritative despite the rough edges from his raw throat.

Bart goes back upstairs to retrieve their computers from their bags, and his teammates start to comb through the footage Tim asked them to look at. When he goes to join them, they all smile at Tim, but he sees the sad shadows in their eyes. He knows his team knows him. They can see when he's not as okay as he wants them to believe, and they know when not to push. Tim takes his place at the main computer and pulls up Hawthorne's bank records.

He discards the transactions made with the Horsemen's money, made to mislead his pursuers, and instead focuses on the older accounts, tracking recent purchases. He also finds the file on the members of Los Segadores he has archived, taking a moment to read through Hawthorne's profile. Back in his gang days, he hadn't stirred up much trouble, so Tim's reports on him don't give him much information. He hacks into GCPD's database and digs up Hawthorne's arrest records, sighing in annoyance when he sees how sparse they are. Thanatos has been very careful in recent years not to draw attention to himself.

Tim sends off a text to Pru with Hawthorne's name and common aliases, to see if she's heard of him. He already knows she hadn't known much about Thanatos, so he's hoping she'll be able to give him more information with a name—not just an alias. He also forwards the message to Jason, asking him to send it to some of his contacts.

An alert from his computer catches Tim's attention, and he curses under his breath as he reads the notification. He has a program tracking any reports of both Tim Drake and Red Robin, and it sorts through any information available and sends the most important ones to him, based on an algorithm he'd developed. This alert in particular flashes red—the category with the highest priority.

"Guys," Tim calls, glancing over his shoulder at his teammates. "We've got another problem. Bart, can you get Jason down here? He's going to want to hear this, too." Bart nods and rushes off, returning a few moments later with Jason following behind him. Four sets of eyes land on him, and Tim runs a hand through his hair. "The Two Horsemen have released an open contract against me to pretty much every mercenary network I know of."

“Man, they must *really* want you dead,” Kon says with a low whistle. Tim bites his lip and taps his fingers against the armrest of his chair. “How do we fix this?”

“We’ve got options,” Tim muses, sinking deep into his thoughts. “This will admittedly complicate things with Thanatos, but it’s nothing we can’t handle. I’m sure I could pay off another mercenary to accept the job and stall for me until I can take the Horsemen down. I’ve been on their trail for months now, though, so I’m not certain a mercenary will be able to keep them off my back for that long without being replaced.”

“Could we fake your death?” Cassie asks. Tim shakes his head and points out a clause in the contract.

“Thanatos screwed them over by lying about the job and taking the pay. They’re being careful about it now and want proof of death.”

“There’s always the nuclear option,” Jason suggests, grinning.

“No.”

“Aw, you’re no fun, Little Red.”

“I might have to temporarily torch my identity,” Tim says with a grimace. “Of course, I won’t be back on the streets for a little while, but Red Robin may need a longer break.” He turns back to his computer and studies the tracking log from the night he’d been caught by Thanatos. “At least I’ve got a lead to follow. With any luck, I’ll be able to find their main headquarters in Gotham and figure out who they are.”

Something seems to occur to him, and he turns back to the computer. He starts typing, and a moment later, security footage starts to play on screen from where the two cargo trucks had converged. Tim studies each frame carefully, and when he finds what he's looking for, he grins—all teeth and arrogance. It's Red Robin's most vicious smile.

"My facial recognition software has a lock on War, one of the two kingpins for the whole operation. He was overseeing the shipment that night, and now that I know which guy is him," he says, gesturing to the security footage and the men gathered around the trucks, "I'll be able to track down his identity."

"So, we're taking down Thanatos *and* the Horsemen before they have a chance to kill you?" Kon asks. Tim nods in response, prompting a sigh from his friend. "Dude, you get into the deepest shit."

"I do my best," Tim says, rolling his eyes. "I'll keep looking through the financial records, and I'll do what I can to track down War. You just need to focus on finding Hawthorne."

"We'll need someone on Baby Bird sittin' duty once lockdown lifts, too," Jason says. Tim shoots an unimpressed look his way. "Sorry kid, but ya look like a gentle breeze could knock ya over."

"I can stay on lockdown here in the Perch or go completely underground. Either way, I'll be fine. Public records link me to this building, so there's a potential risk there, but the Perch is better stocked with the medical supplies I may need while I'm recovering from my last encounter with Hawthorne." He sighs, but the sound dissolves into a harsh coughing fit. "Especially if my fever gets worse again," he rasps, once he regains the ability to speak. There's a pause as his teammates exchange knowing glances.

“When was the last time you had a dose of your antibiotics?” Cassie asks. Tim’s sheepish expression is answer enough, and the three members of his team let out a sigh.

“I call first dibs on kicking his ass when he’s feeling better,” Kon says, glancing at Bart and Cassie. Both of them nod, and Tim rolls his eyes.

“You can *try,* Kon,” he says dryly. Instead of a verbal response, Kon merely scoops Tim up and carts him upstairs, ignoring his indignant protests.

“Just for that comment,” Kon says, tone smug and downright *obnoxious,* “I’m initiating Protocol: Kilo Tango Alpha.”

“Don’t you dare!” Tim replies. He tries to sound threatening, but it’s a difficult task when he’s being carried like a sack of potatoes. He can hear Jason cackling somewhere behind them.

Kon drops Tim on the couch, and Bart, the traitor, already has Tim’s comforter in hand. He wraps him up in a snug *vigilante burrito* as soon as he’s deposited on the couch, leaving only Tim’s head visible from the nose up. Cassie joins them with cough syrup and Tim’s antibiotics in hand, moments later. Kon moves toward the kitchen to heat up some soup Alfred left in his freezer a few months ago. Jason stands by the hidden entrance to Tim’s operations center, looking both dumbfounded and delighted at once.

“I hate Protocol: Kilo Tango Alpha,” Tim grumbles, voice muffled by the heavy blanket. “Keep Tim Alive my *ass.* You fools just love embarrassing me.”

“Nah,” Bart says, flopping down onto the couch next to him. “We love a big dummy who can’t take care of himself.”

“Hey, at least we’re not using Protocol: Sierra Bravo Sierra Lima,” Cassie says with a laugh. She passes over the medicine, and Tim takes a moment to free a hand from the confines of the blanket.

“And what does that one stand for?” Jason asks, tone brimming with glee. He wanders over and ruffles Tim’s hair. He gets an offended squawk and a weak swat at his hand for his efforts.

“Show the Boy Some Love,” Cassie replies brightly, moving to take the seat on Bart’s other side. Jason snorts and sits down on the other sofa, propping his feet up on the coffee table.

“Baby Bird, your teammates are the fuckin’ *best.”*

“They collectively share one brain cell.”

“And that one brain cell is better than your *entire genius brain* is at keeping you alive,” Kon says, coming back into the living room with a bowl of soup in one hand and a bag of popcorn in the other. “Now, since we’re stuck here, we’re going to put on a movie, and after you’ve eaten something, I’ll get your laptop for you. You can keep working for a little while, because I know it’ll drive you insane if you don’t, but after, you’re going to sleep like a normal human, okay?”

Tim flips him off, but he nods his agreement. He knows better than to argue with his teammates when it comes to his health. He accepts the bowl of soup, and Kon takes his seat next to him. They bicker for a few minutes before Bart picks the most ridiculous looking movie he can find. It’s supposed to be some gritty, natural disaster survival flick, but it’s *delightfully* awful—to the point of hilarity. Bart’s remarkably proud of his choice, and the group spends more time making fun of the movie than actually watching it.

Tim eats slowly, and as soon as he finishes his soup, he levels a flat look at Kon. He has his laptop in hand mere moments later. He gets back to work, following Hawthorne's financial records. Tim creates a new file to observe all the potential plans he could formulate with the purchases he's making, trying to decipher what Hawthorne's next move will be. After an hour or so, Kon confiscates the laptop. Tim starts to protest, but Bart claps a hand over his mouth before he can speak. Tim bites him in retaliation.

"Ow! That was *mean,* Tim!"

"You and I both know what I'm like when I'm mean. That wasn't it."

"Aw," Cassie coos, propping her elbows up on her knees and resting her chin in her hands. "Is somebody getting grouchy?"

"Somebody is plotting revenge. I'm thinking I'll hack your electronics to play Darude Sandstorm—not the original, maybe a cover done on a shitty kazoo—at various intervals throughout the day. At full volume. With no way to turn it off."

"Diabolical," Kon says, returning to the room. "We're truly blessed you've chosen to use your talents for good and not for evil."

"Flattery isn't going to spare you, Kon," Tim says. "Besides, you were the one who initiated this stupid protocol. For that, I'm considering giving you a harmonica accompaniment to go with the kazoo." Kon laughs and sits back down. Tim shuffles closer to his warm friend and lets out a hiss as the movement pulls on the stitches in his side. The pain sends black spots dancing across his vision, and he gasps for breath, lungs struggling to pull in enough air. He coughs, a harsh, grating sound.

“Your immune system is so bad, dude,” Bart says, patting him on the back.

“It’s fuckin’ pitiful,” Jason chimes in, voice somehow both mocking and sympathetic. He leans forward, studying Tim’s face carefully. “You okay there, kid?”

“Fine,” Tim wheezes. “Only *all* of my organs are screaming at me. No biggie.” Jason raises a sardonic brow as Tim leans against the back of the couch.

“Ra’s al Ghul straight up *sucks,"* Bart says with a pout. “I bet he keeps your spleen in a jar somewhere.”

“He probably talks to it,” Tim agrees.

“He *definitely* calls it his precious,” Kon says.

“God, that’s not even the creepiest he’s *actually* been around me.” Tim groans and covers his face with his hands. “At least he’s not due for another attempt on my patience for another few days. I think.” His face scrunches up, and Bart’s smile goes alight with mischief. He reaches over to boop him on the nose, and Tim can’t quite suppress his smile as Bart snickers.

They settle back down, attention drawn to the terrible movie Bart picked. Once the credits start to roll, Cassie gets up to fetch some painkillers for Tim, which he accepts with a grateful smile. Jason somehow finds an even *worse* zombie movie, so naturally, that’s what they decide to watch. Surrounded on both sides by his friends and partially leaning against Kon, Tim yawns his way through the first act

of the film. The strong pain meds always make him groggy, and he's warm and feeling safe for the first time in a week.

Tim drifts off, and he dreams.

Candlelight Vigil

Chapter Summary

An Interlude (It's all a dream)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim's morning starts with an unexpected, but not unwelcome, guest. The smell of his favorite coffee roast wakes him, and he yawns, still drowsy and half-asleep. Tim sits up, rubbing his eyes. It's only after he hears his kitchen cabinet doors opening and shutting that he realizes someone else is in his apartment. A familiar voice hums a tune, and the tension bleeds out from his limbs. He blinks and puts his bo staff back into the hidden compartment in the headboard, uncertain when he'd even reached for it.

Tim stumbles out of bed, eyes barely open as he passes through the hallway and into the kitchen. He leans against the doorframe, a fond smile curling his lips at the sight of Alfred making breakfast. He wanders over and sleepily wraps his arms around the old butler. He knows Alfred won't let his professionalism interfere with Tim's affection today, and he's right. Alfred returns the hug immediately, and Tim murmurs a greeting to him.

"It's good to see you again, Master Tim. It has been far too long since you've last been in Gotham," Alfred says, pulling away from the hug to study him. His smile emphasizes the age lines on his face, and the warmth in his eyes sends a pang of nostalgia through Tim's bones. "And a happy birthday to you, young man."

"Thanks Alfred," Tim says. "It's good to be back."

Alfred already has a steaming mug of coffee ready for him, and Tim takes it with a happy sigh. It tastes *perfect,* made exactly to Tim's

preferences. Despite being gone for nearly a year now—several months searching for Bruce, followed by another six completely off the grid—he's never stopped missing quiet mornings at the manor, spent chatting with Alfred over coffee and breakfast.

"Are you planning to return permanently?" Alfred asks, crisp tones colored by chastisement. "Or shall you be off again to who knows where?" He levels a flat look at Tim. "You had several people quite concerned for you."

"Sorry," Tim says with a sigh. He's definitely not awake enough for this conversation. "I didn't want *anyone* to know where I was."

"Yes, your teammates made that clear." Tim smiles a little as Alfred gestures toward the small pile of gifts sitting on the coffee table from his friends—for the Christmas he'd missed and his birthday. He also spots a perfectly wrapped box, most likely Alfred's own addition to the pile. "They were very upset to learn you'd left, and not even Miss Barbara could find you when they asked her where you'd gone."

"I'm planning on calling them later," Tim says, "They'll probably be furious I came back to Gotham first. Anyways, yeah I'm back for good. I'll still be splitting my time between here and San Francisco, though." He wrinkles his nose. "Ukraine was interesting and all, but I definitely miss my team."

Alfred hums and turns off the stove. He grabs a potholder and takes a tray of blueberry scones out from the oven. Tim grins at the sight and the heavenly smell, and he moves to set the kitchen table for the two of them. He's surprised to see the cake already sitting on it. Alfred merely rests a hand on his shoulder when Tim stumbles over his words of thanks. One thing hasn't changed in the time he's been away; Alfred is still the best of them all.

Breakfast is spent catching up, though the conversation gently side steps around the topic of vigilante work. Alfred tells him he's tried a few new recipes he thinks Tim will like, and he took the liberty of freezing several of them for him. Tim talks about his time abroad, skipping over the bits about tracking down his first cousin once removed—his mother's cousin—and the training and the near fatal mission in Siberia he'd taken on. He keeps things pleasant, even though he knows Alfred is aware of this. Conversation peters out after Tim finishes off the last buttery scone.

"Might I offer you a word of advice, Master Tim?"

"Yeah, of course. What is it?"

"You should reach out to Master Dick. I believe he'll be very pleased to hear from you."

"I…I'll think about it. I've got to get ready for work, but thank you for breakfast, really. I'm glad you stopped by." He gives Alfred another hug and goes to get ready for a day at the office—the first he'll have in-person since he left Gotham. He goes through his morning routine —sparing a moment to grab the travel mug of coffee Alfred hands him —and heads off with a wave.

Tam greets him at the office with her usual no-nonsense demeanor, but she does offer him a smile. They've been working closely for months while Tim was abroad, and even though things between them hadn't ever quite been the same since he faked her father's death, she's softened considerably toward him. She hands him a large stack of paperwork, and the smile turns a bit smug.

He has three different meetings before lunch, and he'll have to get a start on the files Tam gave him, after. But still, Alfred's advice lingers in the back of his head throughout the morning, and he finds himself

getting distracted. He's not sure if seeing Dick Grayson is really going to be more than just another way to get himself hurt. Then again, it has been a while, and Tim misses his brother. He just doesn't know if it'll be worth it.

He finally figures it's at least worth a shot, and after his final meeting ends, just before lunch, Tim returns to his office and uses the WE phone to dial a familiar number. He waits as the line rings, tapping his fingers against his mahogany desk. It doesn't take long for Dick to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hi Dick, it's Tim." He knows he sounds stilted and *off,* but this is the first time Tim has talked to Dick in a long time.

"Timmy! It's been a while, little brother. What's up?"

"Well…" He hesitates, biting his lip. "Would you like to spend some time together this afternoon?"

"Sorry Timmy, but I'm actually going to the zoo with Damian today. They've apparently gotten a new penguin exhibit! We got tickets for the grand opening the minute they started selling them. He's been really excited about this for weeks." A sharp jolt of disappointment runs down his spine. Of course. He already has plans. Tim doubts Dick remembered his birthday.

"Oh, well maybe I could join—" He's interrupted by the sound of an impatient Damian calling out to Dick, as well as the loud response. Tim's heart sinks a little further.

“I’ll be downstairs in a second! I just have to get my shoes!” Dick’s voice returns to a normal volume as he says, *“I’ve gotta go, but we’ll talk later, okay?”*

“Yeah…okay,” Tim says softly. “Bye, Dick.” He hangs up the phone and sighs, running a hand through his hair. So much for Alfred’s advice. Sure, Dick might’ve been glad to hear from him, but that didn’t make a difference. He can’t explain to himself why he thought it could’ve.

It’s fine. Tim’s in Gotham for a reason. He’ll just take care of the case he’s working on and finally go back to the Tower. He can survive another day or two until he wraps things up here.

Tim finishes up at work and drives back to his apartment, mentally running through the case information he’s gathered already. Scarecrow’s still safely ensconced in Arkham, for now, but his men have been making trouble around the Bowery. He’s heard whispers of a new formula of Fear Toxin, and the thugs have been grabbing civilians off the streets to be test subjects. Bodies are piling up. Red Robin plans to shut that operation down as quickly as he can, before anyone else can die.

Tim snags a quick nap and a rushed dinner before he suits up, and Red Robin flies over the streets of Gotham just as twilight settles across its skies. He’s hoping to avoid the Bats, but he’s taken his comm and his emergency beacon, just in case. Red’s already identified the ringleader of the group of henchmen doing Scarecrow’s sick human experiments, and now it’s just a matter of finding him. He lands in the Bowery and starts searching in a grid pattern.

It takes some time, but he tracks him down in a dingy alley, cornering a young couple. He takes a breath and leaps, getting between the civilians and their assailant. He’s quick to take him down, but not before the guy has a chance to call in reinforcements—twenty or so, from what he can tell. Red’s outnumbered by a considerable margin,

and he knows this fight is going to get *ugly* very quickly. He activates his emergency beacon, hoping backup will come before he's gassed with Fear Toxin. That would make things difficult, to say the least.

One of the goons manages to get behind him and land a heavy blow to his shoulder. It's not dislocated, but he's distracted by the pain for a split second—long enough for two more men to pin him against the rough brick of one building bracketing the alley. He bucks, trying to shake off the grip, but he gets a sharp blow to the face for his efforts. His head cracks against the stone, leaving him disoriented. Before he has a chance to recover, a needle stabs into his neck.

Oh, that's not good.

He's well aware he's on a timer now before the toxin has a chance to take over, so he renews his struggle to get away. One of the men holding him merely laughs. He delivers a heavy punch to Red's side, and Red kicks out wildly behind him. His foot makes contact, and the grip on him loosens on one side, so he takes advantage of the reprieve, twisting out from the other man's grasp. He's tiring, and he's not sure how long he's got before he's screaming himself hoarse.

The fight spills out from the alley and onto the street. Red fights with as much ferocity as he can, holding himself back from the lethal tactics he knows he could use with ease. He stumbles back as one of the men draws a firearm, moving to dodge the bullet which whizzes past him, only to move directly within reach of another adversary and receive a stab in his right side. The guy grabs Red by his already injured shoulder and throws him. Red isn't even aware of where he's going to land until his back crashes into the water.

Everything is cold and dark, and Red can't tell which way is up. He thrashes, struggling to move against the ice in his blood. He knows he's starting to panic, but he isn't certain if it's from the toxin or the very real possibility of drowning. He sinks deeper into the waters of the harbor, still trying to make his heavy limbs cooperate with him.

The pressure on his lungs becomes unbearable, and he unconsciously inhales. He's running out of air, and his vision is going black at the edges. Red closes his eyes, exhausted and scared.

A hand grabs his bicep and pulls him upward, toward the surface, toward *air*. Red gasps and coughs as his head breaks through the water, trying to stop the burning in his lungs. He's dragged back onto solid ground, rough concrete scraping against his cheek. The panic response from a near drowning mixed with the onset of fear toxin's nasty effects gives him a very small window of coherence, and he needs to figure out what's happening before it closes. He looks up to see who fished him out of the harbor and is shocked to see someone he never thought would actually save his life, rather than work to end it himself.

The Red Hood crouches down next to him, one hand loosely gripping a handgun as he studies him. Red can't see Jason's gaze through the helmet, but it settles like a weight against his skin. Red shivers, freezing despite the stifling summer air, muscles tense until Hood holsters the weapon.

"Hood," Red croaks, still coughing up water. His voice is ragged and shaky. "Thanks for the save."

"Yeah," Hood drawls, studying him. "You okay?"

"I got a direct injection of a new Fear Toxin formula. I don't have long before it takes full effect."

"It'll be alright, Little Red," Hood says. He sounds uncomfortable and uncertain, even through the voice modulators in his helmet. "I'll take ya back to the Cave, and then—"

“No! Not the Cave.” His hand wraps weakly around Hood’s wrist. His fingers are trembling, and he can feel the toxin taking over his thoughts, clouding his reasoning. This is Jason Todd. The man wants him *dead.* His free hand reaches for his own throat, resting against the scar Jason put there, years ago. The last time he’d seen him, Jason had stabbed him through the chest. He needs to get away, *now.* Red tries to stand up on his shaking legs, but his knees buckle. Hood catches him before he hits the concrete.

“Easy now,” he says. “Where am I takin’ ya?” Red gives him an incredulous look, and Hood scoffs. “I won’t just leave ya here, dumbass.”

“Why not?” Red snaps, practically snarling at him. “I can’t imagine you actually want to *help* me. Or do you just want to watch me suffer?” Hood sighs, stepping back once Red can stand on his own.

“I definitely deserved that, but in all fairness, kid, ya need help.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Red’s voice breaks as he shows Hood the active emergency beacon. “I tried signaling for help half an hour ago, Hood. Don’t take me back to the Cave.” They stare one other down for a long moment before Hood nods.

“Not the Cave,” he agrees. “Ya gotta tell me where it is I should be goin’ instead, though.”

Tim gives him the address to his Perch, taking a gamble on how trustworthy Hood really is. It’s not like he has another option, anyways. He’s barely conscious as Hood hefts him onto the back of his motorcycle and drives off toward Tim’s home. Red directs him to his underground garage and details how to get past his security. Once they arrive at the Perch, Tim removes the cowl and finally, *finally* lets his composure slip. The Fear Toxin takes effect, and Tim’s *gone.*

He relives Jason and Damian trying to kill him, over and over—having his throat slit, being beaten bloody in the basement of the Titan's Tower, getting stabbed in the chest with a Batarang, falling, falling as he was thrown, glass shattering around his prone body, feeling the heat of the exploding grenade, plummeting as his line was cut. All the while, he hears them, all of them. Bruce, Dick, Jason, and Damian all speaking in venomous tones, telling him just how worthless and unwanted he is. He sees Kon, Bart, his parents, Steph, and Bruce, dead-eyed and utterly still.

And then it all goes black.

When he blinks open his eyes, his throat feels like he's swallowed sandpaper, and his chest is killing him. He groans and sits up, only to be met with Jason Todd's teal eyes, more blue than the green he'd seen the last time they were face-to-face. There's stark relief in them, and Tim isn't sure why. He's exhausted and confused, and his limbs are shaking. He feels cold all over. His mouth tastes of copper as he tries to speak, but his lungs still burn from the near drowning.

"What happened?" He finally manages to croak. For some reason, Jason hesitates, and Tim becomes aware of a calloused hand in his, thumb stroking against his knuckles. "Jason?"

"I wasn't able to synthesize the antidote in time. You flatlined, and I had to do CPR for fifteen minutes before you came back. Tim, you *died."*

"Oh," Tim says, voice soft. He's surprised to see so much anguish in Jason's face. He wonders why Jason had bothered to save him.

"Thank *fuck* I gotcha back, kid. You'll be alright." Jason ruffles his

hair, and Tim hums noncommittally.

"It doesn't really matter."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" Jason growls. The fingers clutching his tighten into a bruising grip.

"It means no one would care, Jason. Sure, a few people might miss me for what I can do for them, but they'll be mourning a tool, not a person. I'm not someone anyone would mourn. *Nobody* loves Timothy Drake. No one *ever* has, so why would it matter?"

"Are ya some kind of idiot?" Jason says, glaring at him. "Seriously? What about the rest of the family?"

"It's not like the Bats would give a fuck," Tim argues. "They never wanted me. I forced Bruce's hand because I knew his secret, and he was going to get himself killed without a Robin, and I was too stubborn to let him go on without one. He only adopted me after my dad died because I was Robin by then. I was his responsibility. Now that a better Robin has come along—the blood son—they don't need to pretend to want me around, anymore." Jason raises a brow, so Tim continues, spitting all the vitriol that's been building in him since he first realized how little he meant to his supposed family. "They threw me out, Jason. I'm smart enough to know I'm not necessary anymore. They don't *care."*

Jason sighs, running a hand through his unruly hair. He looks a bit lost, like he doesn't know how to respond to Tim's words. After a moment, he shakes his head and stands up.

"I'm gonna grab some comfy clothes for ya, and then we can bitch together about those fuckin' assholes. Sound good?" He sends Tim a

crooked grin, and Tim nods in acquiescence.

Jason returns a few minutes later, somehow looking even more stricken than he had before. In one arm, he's carrying a bundle of clothes for Tim, and his other hand carries a plate. A single slice of cake and a lit candle rest on top. Tim's breath catches in his throat at the sight.

"Fuck," Jason says, voice wobbly. "I didn't realize…"

"You're not the only one," Tim says, shrugging. Jason scowls, and Tim sighs. "Dick forgot, too. Besides, I thought you wanted me dead until, like, twenty minutes ago, so I don't blame you."

"Yeah, well, I got my head screwed back on straight, and I realized how fuckin' awful it was to drag ya into my shit with B. Just a fuckin' kid, wantin' to do the right thing, and I went and tried to make B suffer through ya." Jason passes him the clothes, turning around so Tim can change out of his uniform.

"I forgave you a long time ago," Tim admits, tapping Jason on the shoulder once he's clad in sweatpants and a warm sweatshirt. He offers him a smile, and Jason hesitantly returns it.

"You're too nice, Timbit." Jason shakes his head, but his smile grows more fond. He tilts his head to the side, studying him for a moment. "And too damn skinny." He offers the slice of cake, which Tim takes. Jason runs back upstairs to get himself a slice, at Tim's insistence. He waits for his predecessor to return before he starts eating.

Wax drips onto the icing, but Tim couldn't care less. It's the best cake he's ever had. It's one of the best, most unexpected conversations he's ever had, too. He never would've dared to hope to spend time with his

childhood hero, his *Robin,* without venom and blood spilled between them. Something fundamental shifts between him and Jason, and in the flickering candlelight, two former Robins, two outcasts, become two brothers.

Chapter End Notes

You can read a what-if to this chapter here

First Step

Chapter Summary

Reaching out

Jason pinches the bridge of his nose, agitated but not quite dangerously angry—yet. His brother's voice on the other end of the line grates against his nerves. He lets out a huff of breath and interrupts the long-winded plea he's been subjected to since he answered the call.

"Listen Dickhead, the kid doesn't wanna talk to ya. Either respect it, kindly, or *fuck off."*

"C'mon," Dick whines, voice desperate. "Little Wing, can't you just pass along a message for me? Please?"

"That depends." Jason's tone is flat, unyielding. He can practically see Dick pouting at his response.

"Just...Tell him I'd like to make things right between us. Properly." Dick sighs, and a burst of static sounds through the phone. "I know I've been acting like nothing's wrong for years now, but I understand now that I shouldn't have assumed Tim was okay." Jason stays silent for a long moment, frustration mounting.

"Fine," he says, rolling his eyes. "I'll tell him, but that doesn't mean he has to talk to ya."

"Thanks, Jay," Dick replies. He sounds upbeat, but Jason's known him long enough to detect the dejection in his words. "You're planning on stopping by the Cave after Tim's lockdown lifts, right?" Jason declines

and begins crossing the length of one of Tim's spare bedrooms, readying himself for the explosion to come. "What do you mean you're not coming? We need to figure out how to keep Timmy safe!"

"Yeah, and I'm already workin' on it with Tim and his team. Kid's convinced the Bats won't wanna help, anyways. We'll come to ya if we decide we need ya." Jason hangs up before he can receive a response, sighing angrily and pacing like a caged animal. He runs a hand through his hair, tugging harshly against the strands, as though he could counter his building headache.

Jason snags a book off the shelf and stalks downstairs to Tim's workspace, where his younger brother sits at his computer, working. His chin rests in his hand, and his expression is fixed in stoic focus. The dark shadows under his eyes have receded under his team's care, but he still looks worn in a way that reminds Jason of a threadbare sweater he remembers wearing while he was still living on the streets. Tim's lost in his work, and Jason knows from experience it'll take either a natural disaster or one of his teammates' stubborn intervention to drag him away. Jason drags over a chair and sits down next to Tim, leaning back and propping his feet against the console. Tim doesn't acknowledge his presence.

Lockdown lifts in three hours, and according to the current plan, the Perch will only be accessible long enough for Jason to leave. The Titans would stay to guard Tim until Hawethorne could be tracked down. They'd made little progress, so far, and Jason's itching to get back on the streets to do a little investigating of his own. While Tim's working, he can't pass along Dick's message, so he contents himself with reading to pass the time. He's startled when a phone rings, and Tim actually resurfaces from his own head to answer it.

"Hello, Cousin," Tim greets coolly. Jason raises a brow at that. He didn't think Tim had any relatives. Jason can only hear one side of the conversation, so he tries to piece it together. He has no idea who Tim's talking to—well, his cousin, apparently, but still. "Hm, I suppose I made an impression." The tone is dry and sarcastic. "Of course I'm somewhere safe. I doubt even *you'd* be able to get past my security."

He hums an affirmation after another moment. “Underway, though progress is slow.” There’s another pause as the person on the other line replies, and Tim sighs. “Ah, that might not be the wisest course of action. Red Hood might shoot you, if you do.”

Jason lightly jabs an elbow into Tim’s ribs, mindful of the healing injuries, and is met with a strange look. He tilts his head to the side, like a bird, and fixes those pale, pale eyes on Jason’s face. He stares for a moment, caught between one heartbeat and the next, scrutinizing, and Jason gets the feeling the kid can see past the skin, muscle, and bone, right down to his very soul. The moment passes, and Tim’s attention moves back to his conversation.

“Keep them occupied? That would be helpful, yes.” Tim laughs lightly, mockingly. “Well, you *do* owe me after what happened with Mavka.” Tim grins, toothy and sharp. There’s another brief pause. “Excellent. I won’t insult you by wishing you luck.” His smile softens from something feral to merely amused as the other person responds. “I will. We’ll speak soon, Cousin.”

“What the fuck?” Jason asks, as soon as Tim sets the phone down. Tim shrugs and smiles, a secretive little thing which sends a chill down Jason’s spine. Tim can be really spooky, sometimes.

“Don’t worry,” Tim replies easily. “My cousin simply wants to lend a hand. He won’t be interfering in Gotham.” Something sharp in his tone warns Jason to let it go, so he drops the subject.

“Well,” he says in a slow drawl, “I’ve gotta message for ya.” Tim raises a brow, a silent gesture to continue, and Jason struggles for a moment. He knows Tim won’t react well to it, but he deserves to know. “Dick called. Wanted me to tell ya he wants to make things right. He feels like shit for assumin’ you’d be okay after everythin’ ya went through. I told him ya don’t owe him a fuckin’ thing, but I figured I should at least pass along the message. It’s your choice how to respond, if ya decide to.”

“Noted,” Tim says in a clipped tone. He takes a breath, expression carefully blank. “You leave in a little over two and a half hours. I assume you’re going to immediately begin investigating?” Jason nods, and Tim doesn’t miss a beat, apparently having expected his answer. “I’ve made an encrypted comm unit for you to stay in contact with us. It’s on my workbench.”

Jason moves to the table, spotting the small piece of delicate technology and scooping it up. Tim’s work is always impressive, but his skill with engineering is a marvel.

“I’ve also developed schematics for a new helmet, if you’d like an upgrade,” Tim calls over his shoulder. Jason snorts, amused and warm with pride for his wickedly smart little brother.

“Have I mentioned lately that you’re the fuckin’ coolest?” Jason calls back.

“Try never, but thanks,” Tim says, allowing himself a smile. Jason shakes his head fondly.

He still can’t believe he and Tim have gotten to such a good place. It feels surreal, at times. He remembers his first few years after he’d resurfaced from the Pit’s poison waters, manipulated with grief and betrayal into hating the tiny, brilliant kid who’d stepped into *his* life and *replaced* him. The Lazarus Pit had bled from his every breath, back then. Its haze had colored his personality an acid green, but even though he’d been insane with it, he’s still responsible for every awful thing he’d said and did to Tim.

While Tim understands Jason’s culpability for his actions, he also recognizes Jason when he’s *himself* as a completely different entity

from the monster the Pit used to possess him. Jason has a difficult time making the distinction, but he's grateful for Tim's forgiveness, even though he knows he doesn't deserve it.

Maybe someday he can actually earn it.

Jason's drawn from his thoughts when Bart zips down the stairs, brown eyes bright with mischief. Kon follows at a more relaxed pace, but his expression is nearly identical to Bart's. Tim sighs, shoulders slumping.

"Let me guess," he says, practically pouting at his teammates. "Protocol: Golf Foxtrot Sierra?" Jason can't stop the bark of laughter before it escapes him, and Tim sends a betrayed look his way.

"Your team and their fuckin' protocols," he says, shaking his head. "What's this one?"

"Go the Fuck to Sleep," Kon answers, and Jason laughs again, harder this time. Tim grumbles, but he lets his friends fuss over him. He wishes Jason luck with his investigation and launches into an explanation of resetting his lockdown protocol for his two friends as they lead him back upstairs.

The time passes slowly, but eventually, Jason gathers his gear and suits up. The Red Hood waits impatiently for the timer to run out, and as the seconds tick down, he revs his bike and gets ready to drive off the moment he can. The less time lockdown is lifted, the better.

He's gone the moment the doors to the underground garage open, and they lock shut behind him mere seconds later.

**

Dick Grayson will happily admit that today is *not* his day. He knows he avoids the reality of his own actions—the fact that he can *hurt* the people he loves. It's a flaw of his. He likes to pretend all his good intentions and affections make it impossible for him to have a negative impact on anyone he cares for. He'll gloss over problems, ignoring them until they fade into the background. He just hadn't realized the wounds he'd given Tim had festered, rotting away their relationship into something twisted and unrecognizable.

He picks at his lunch, stomach churning with guilt. He hasn't had much of an appetite since they'd rescued Tim. He hasn't slept much, either. He just can't stop thinking about the terrible things Tim had said about himself, with such damning *conviction.* Dick feels Bruce's careful eyes on him from across the table. He looks up and offers a halfhearted smile, despite knowing his father won't be appeased. Before Bruce can ask, Dick voices his thoughts.

"I talked to Jay earlier." He folds his arms on top of the table and rests his head against them. "It didn't go so well, and Tim still refuses to let me apologize. He won't talk to me unless it's related to the case." His mouth draws into a frown. "They don't want us working with them, either. B, I don't know what to do."

"Ordinarily," Bruce says, in that halting tone his voice carries anytime conversations get a little too emotional for him to deal with, "I'd advise giving him space, which is exactly what we did wrong. We gave him too much, and now the distance seems insurmountable. Tim's a detective. He relies on evidence, and we haven't given him any over the past few years which would make him feel as though he still has a place with us."

"Tim was a neglected kid," Dick says softly. "How could I possibly have been so *stupid* to think he'd be fine on his own without falling back into the mindset his dumb parents gave him?" Bruce hums

thoughtfully, but he doesn't immediately respond. Dick fills the silence, speaking his thoughts aloud. "I mean, he grew up without *anyone* wanting him around or loving him, so of *course* the minute I practically kicked him out, he interpreted it as...as just another abandonment—no one wanting him, no one loving him."

Dick bites his lip, eyes burning. He *hates* this, and the heavy weight resting against his ribcage hasn't relented since he'd realized how badly he'd screwed up.

"We all made mistakes with Tim," Bruce says. "Jason and Damian's hostility toward him went mostly without any consequence, and I certainly should've handled his assassination attempt on Captain Boomerang far better than I did. He stopped himself before he crossed the line, and rather than commending him for making the right decision, I condemned him for considering it in the first place."

"And yet, we've looked past worse things done by the others," Dick adds. "Worse things done *to Tim* by the others, even." He groans and buries his face in his hands, resting his elbows against the table. "God, he was still just a kid, B, and I took away the one constant in his life. He had no one left, no safety net."

Dick feels like he's crumbling, his insides turning to ash. Bruce puts a hand on his shoulder, and Dick looks up at him, expression reminiscent of that lost little boy he'd been that terrible night at the circus. Bruce nods toward the door and moves to stand. Dick follows, wordlessly, as they trudge up the stairs.

"Get some rest," Bruce says, softly. "I'm glad you understand and recognize your failings with Tim, but you can't destroy yourself over them. That isn't the way to move forward. You need to move past what mistakes you've made and learn from them. Remember, you've got your operation to work on." He smiles, then, and Dick lets out a watery chuckle.

Operation: BOTH (Bring Our Timmy Home) is already off to a terrible start. Dick hasn't been able to properly reach out, and according to Jason, Tim fully expects the Bats not to help with the ongoing effort to find Hawthorne. At least Cass is on her way back to Gotham. She's definitely Tim's favorite member of the family, and if anyone can convince him to let the Bats show how much they care, it's her.

Babs is still on speaking terms with him, and so is Steph, though neither of them are as close to Tim as they once were. There's a coolness to their interactions with him, but it's nothing like the glacial frostiness Tim wears as armor when he's around Dick. It's frustrating, even if it is well deserved. He knows he'll have to work for Tim's forgiveness, and that'll only happen on Tim's own terms.

If it happens at all.

He hopes Tim will reach out, will let him back into his life. He hadn't meant to let his little brother get so far away. Bruce can probably see the conflict in his eyes, because he sends him a fond smile and gently pushes him toward his room.

"Rest," he says. "I'll talk to Jay in the meantime. He might be willing to offer some insight into the investigation the Titans have underway. We can hopefully collaborate and expedite the process. Once Tim is out of danger, then we can focus on convincing him of his place with us."

Dick hesitates, but eventually, he nods. He's exhausted, and he knows he's not in any condition to help anyone. He has a feeling Nightwing will be benched tonight, which is probably for the best. He'll keep Damian company, in that case. His foot's healing nicely, but it'll still be some time before Robin can go back out on patrol. Something gnaws at the inside of his stomach at the thought of his baby brother, and he fiercely shakes it away. He refuses to feel guilty for spending

time with Damian.

Even though prioritizing Damian had allowed him to neglect Tim.

Neglect…Is he as bad as the Drakes were? The people who abandoned their son to travel the world, leaving him all alone in that empty house? Or maybe he's worse. He'd given Tim all the love and affection of a doting older brother, only to rip it away from him. At least with the Drakes, he hadn't known what he'd been missing.

Dick shuts his bedroom door behind him and makes his way to bed, crawling under the covers and tucking them close around himself. His limbs feel leaden, with none of the usual lightness bubbling in his veins. Dick rolls onto his side, facing his bedside table, and he sighs, catching sight of the framed photo sitting on it. It's faded with age, but it's probably Dick's most prized possession. John and Mary Grayson stand on either side of Jack and Janet Drake. In the center of the frame, Dick kneels before the two couples, a sweet-faced toddler in his lap.

Seeing his parents and his little brother together—all smiling beautifully—sends a wave of grief crashing over him. He misses them.

He can't do this—can't sleep with this weight against his chest. Dick scrubs a hand over his face and gets up. He changes into his workout clothes and sneaks down to the Cave. Bruce will probably scold him for it later, but he doesn't care. His mind is too busy, and he wants it all to stop for a little while. He makes his way over to the aerialist equipment and warms up. Right now, he just wants to fly.

Dick takes a deep breath and starts with a simple routine, nothing too fancy. He soon graduates to his more complex maneuvers, focusing on the feeling of his limbs losing their tension and his mind growing blissfully blank. He finishes with his signature quadruple flip, the

same move Tim had used to deduce his identity, the same move he'd promised to perform for that shy toddler he'd met just before his last show at the circus.

When Dick finds himself on solid ground once again, he feels better. Not any less guilty, no, but he's more centered than he was. He hits the showers and changes into comfortable clothes, finally feeling as though he can get some sleep and actually rest. He goes back upstairs and into his bedroom, and he's surprised to see his phone buzzing against the bedside table. Curious, he crosses the room and answers. He doesn't bother checking to see who's calling, so he's startled to hear a familiar voice on the other end of the line.

"Dick," Tim says, voice eerily void of all emotion or inflection. "Jason told me you'd like to talk, so talk."

Sky Splits Open

Chapter Summary

> A conversation with Dick leads to an exhausted Tim facing the full force of his team's coddling

Flustered is an understatement. Dick is completely unprepared for this conversation, and as soon as he hears Tim's calm, clear voice, he forgets every word in the English language, except for a few which would garner a severe look from Alfred. He thought he'd have more time to think over what he wants to say to his little brother, when the time comes. Well the time is *now,* apparently, and Dick's brain refuses to cooperate. Dick's completely thrown off guard.

It's completely calculated, on Tim's part.

"Hi," he finally manages to stammer out. "I, um, okay, okay. Yeah, I-I want to talk. I want to make things right between us, but I know it needs to be on your terms. So, I thought I could maybe tell you what I want to say, and if that's okay with you, I'll actually start talking?"

"Go on," Tim says. His tone is still flat, but Dick wonders if he's amused by his rambling.

"Okay, well first I want to ask how you're feeling. You were hurt pretty badly, and I know your team is taking great care of you, but you *are* still injured."

"I've handled worse," Tim says. "Thank you for asking. I'm on track with my recovery."

"That's great," Dick replies, relieved. He'd been worried for how his

little brother was doing. Not that he doesn't trust the Titans, but no one can just coddle away injuries like that. "Um, okay, so onto the more personal stuff I guess?" He sighs, running a hand through his wavy hair. "I want to apologize, but I know you won't just accept a blanket apology for everything that's happened. Especially if you think I don't know what I'm apologizing for, right?"

"Right. You can't just say you're sorry without knowing why. That accomplishes nothing. Apologies alone don't fix anything either, by the way."

"I know. That's why I think I should lay it all out. All the shit I know I've done that's hurt you, and what I understand about *why* it's hurt you. That way, you'll know that *I* know what I'm apologizing for. And if I miss anything, then I'd like to ask for you to tell me about it, so I know exactly how to be better. I'm not expecting a phone call to magically fix things, but I figured it might be a good way to start making it up to you."

"That...sounds acceptable," Tim says slowly. "I'm actually surprised you've put this much thought into it."

"Oh, thank goodness," Dick says, laughing a little. It has the slightest hysterical edge to it. "I never meant to hurt you, even though I did. Do you want me to explain my reasoning, or…?" He trails off, uncertain. There's silence on the other end of the line for a long moment.

"No," Tim says, finally. "I don't want to know why you thought it would be okay to pull the shit you did." He sighs softly, and Dick can hear the sadness in the sound. It breaks his heart. "At least, not yet."

"Okay," Dick agrees. "This is all at your pace, Timmy." He paces the length of his room, trying to organize his thoughts. "I appreciate you even being willing to talk to me at all." Tim hums but doesn't reply, so

Dick keeps talking. “Um, I guess I’ll start with the first issue, then? Robin.”

“Go ahead.” The words are tight, spoken with restraint.

“I should’ve talked to you first. Asked you, at least, or explained *why* I wanted to give Robin to Damian. I don’t regret giving him the mantle, but I *do* regret not giving you a choice in the matter. And Damian himself…he’ll have to make his own apologies, but my silence when he was cruel to you came across as agreement, right? Rather than disciplining him for trying to hurt you, I told you off for letting him get to you. I get what kind of message that sent you. And, I mean, he tried to kill you before I gave him Robin, so I understand why replacing you with him made it seem like I didn’t care about you.” He stops when a bitter laugh interrupts him. It sends ice running through his veins.

“He tried to kill me after he became Robin, too,” Tim says. “And you yelled at me for fighting back.”

“I…didn’t know.”

Dick doesn’t know when it happened, but his heart sinks to his stomach when he hears the words. He’s been sending Damian the wrong message this whole time: that it’s okay to hurt and kill his brother. He should’ve stopped that behavior before it had a chance to escalate, but he didn’t. He wonders if Damian thinks he agrees with him on the awful things he’s said about Tim over the years, the way he’s treated Tim. The thought alone makes him sick.

“No, you just immediately assumed I was being petty. You also assumed I could and *should* handle all the nasty shit Damian said to me. Told me to be the mature one, because he’s just a kid, right?” There’s thinly veiled anger in his tone. “I was still a kid, too.”

“I prioritized him over you. I neglected you, and as much as I’ve said about how awful your parents were for it, I did the same exact thing. You were my responsibility, too, and I failed you.”

“I’ve always had to be able to take care of myself,” Tim says, voice soft as velvet. “Not by choice.” Dick feels winded, like he’s been kicked in the stomach. He closes his eyes and fights to steady his breathing. It hurts to hear, but it’s all true.

“Then you told me Bruce was alive.”

“Yes, I did. I told you the *truth.”*

“I didn’t trust you, even though I know you better than to think you’d present an idea to me without evidence.”

“You threatened me with Arkham. Made me doubt my own mind.”

“I didn’t listen when you tried to explain yourself. You needed stability and support, and instead, I made you feel unwelcome and unsafe in your own home. Then you left, and I didn’t give you the reassurance that you’re still my family, that I love you, or that you could come to me for help. It nearly got you killed.”

Dick glances out the window, watching as fat raindrops slide down the glass. It’s fitting, in a way. He feels like screaming, and the crack of thunder does the job for him. He thinks his ribcage has shattered with the dark of the night sky, tearing his heart into shreds with every hurt he’s ever inflicted on his own brother. The skies weep for him, cry out where the breath has become trapped in his throat. Dick’s fingers tremble as he reaches out to trace a raindrop’s path down the

window.

"And when you came back, I did nothing," he says, finally.

"You don't like to think you're capable of hurting the people you surround yourself with. Intentionally or not. And I didn't think you cared, regardless."

"Fuck, Tim," Dick says with a sigh. "I'm so *sorry*. I tried to pretend nothing was wrong, that there wasn't this rift between us, and it was my own damn fault. I should've said something to you years ago. Should've clarified, stuck up for you, *something*. And then, Thanatos took you. You were tortured for *days* by that monster, and I didn't know you were even gone until he told us himself. I'd let you drift so far away from our family, I didn't even notice."

"To be fair to you, no one in your family did."

Your family. God, what can Dick say to that? He closes his eyes, listening to the soft sound of his brother's breathing and the rumble of thunder. His eyes burn. He remembers when Tim came to him with his problems for advice. He hates, truly hates, that he's not that person for his little brother anymore.

"We should've been there for you."

"The last time I called for help, no one bothered to come. Hood only found me by accident, and I still died."

"Tim…"

Tim hesitates a moment and says, “Look, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you later, alright?”

He hangs up before Dick can respond.

**

Tim sets his phone down on his desk and stands, massaging his temples. The conversation was more productive than he’d expected, but it was exhausting. Tim hobbles into his kitchen, mindful of his still healing ankle, and leans heavily against the doorframe. Kon’s making dinner for the team, humming some tune Tim recognizes as one of Ma Kent’s favorites. Bart has himself draped upside down over one of the armchairs in the adjoining living room, talking at a rapid-fire pace into his own phone. He spots Tim and wave, grinning broadly.

“Hi Tim! Gar and Rave say hi!”

“Hey,” Tim says, feeling the tension ease from his shoulders. “Tell them I say hi, too.” He misses San Francisco, misses the Tower and the rest of his team. He wonders how soon he’ll be able to go home. Gotham is such a headache. His insides feel tied up in knots with the stress of dealing with the Bats.

“I’m going to pretend I wasn’t able to hear your entire conversation,” Kon calls over his shoulder. “On an *entirely* unrelated note, how are you?”

“Conversation?” Cassie asks, walking into the room, toweling her wet hair dry. She casts a suspicious look toward Tim.

“Yeah, with N,” Kon replies, feigning nonchalance. Tim could strangle him for the look in his friend’s eyes. There’s concern and frustration there, and he hates being the cause of it.

“Tim!” Bart and Cassie chastise in unison. Tim shrugs at them, unabashed.

“Why would you talk to him, dude?” Bart asks, pouting. He flips himself upright and moves to sit cross-legged. “He *sucks.”* Cassie snorts and ruffles Bart’s hair as she passes, going to help Tim hobble over to the couch.

“Curiosity,” Tim says, as though it were that simple. He wishes it were that simple. “I still don’t really understand why the Bats are suddenly so concerned with me, so I figured allowing him to reach out wouldn’t hurt.”

“Except talking to the Bats always screws with your head. We have protocols for this, Dumbass,” Kon says. He turns to frown at Tim, clenched fists resting against his hips. Kon can probably tell Tim isn’t giving him the full truth, but he trusts him enough not to push. He sighs and turns back to dinner.

“Alright, Idiot Genius,” Cassie says, smiling as she sits down next to Tim on the couch. She gently guides his head down into her lap and starts running her hands through his hair. “It’s time for Protocol: Sierra Bravo Sierra Lima. No arguments.”

Tim grumbles, but the sound is drowned out as Bart lets out a loud whoop and rushes to join them, fitting himself between Tim and the back of the couch. Arms wrap around his chest, gentle against his aching ribs.

“Kon,” Bart whines, resting his chin against Cassie’s thigh. “Don’t burn Tim’s apartment down or anything, but hurry *up*. It’s snuggle time.” Tim rolls his eyes, meeting Cassie’s amused expression.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kon says, laughing. “I’ll be there in a second. Can’t miss out on snuggle time.”

“Because the Drakes were shit,” Cassie says with a wicked grin. The other two join her as she adds, “The Bats are shit, and Tim is the shit.”

Tim can hear Kon rustling around in the kitchen for another few minutes before he joins them on the couch, lifting Bart’s and Tim’s legs to slide underneath them. He leans against Cassie’s side, one arm wrapped around her shoulders. Bart sighs happily and snuggles closer to Tim, burying his face between his shoulder blades. Tim yawns and lets his eyes slip shut. The talk with Dick took more out of him than he’d thought. He feels a soul-deep exhaustion sinking into his bones.

Cassie’s fingernails scrape lightly against his scalp, and Bart’s wild curls tickle the back of his neck. Kon reaches for the throw blanket draped over the back of the couch and tosses it over them. He starts to hum again, picking the tune back up from where he’d left off. Tim curls closer to his friends, warm and content.

“How’re you feeling?” Cassie asks after a moment, still running her fingers through his hair. He feels Kon’s free hand squeeze his too-thin shoulder. Tim turns his head to look up at her, cracking one eye open as he’s pulled from the sleepy haze he’d slipped into.

“Hm, about Dick?” He asks, receiving a nod in return. “Well, I’m not exactly thrilled, but he does seem to understand how he screwed up.

It's a start, I guess."

"Remember, you don't owe them anything," Kon says. "Not your forgiveness, not your time, not your energy, nothing."

"I know," Tim agrees softly. He reaches out and taps Kon's shoulder—a thank you in Morse code . "I don't forgive him. I don't know if I ever will, but right now, I'm just so exhausted by the whole thing. Even if I do decide to forgive the Bats, I have no idea how I'd ever be able to trust them again. I'm thinking myself into circles."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Cassie asks. "Or do you just want a distraction?"

"Let's have dinner and maybe put on a movie," he replies. "I just want to stop thinking for a little while." He doesn't even really want to watch anything, but he feels completely drained. Thinking about the issue any more will probably drive him crazy. Lightning streaks through the sky, brightening the room for a split second. Growling thunder follows a moment later. Rain lashes at the windows, and Tim frowns in thought. "The power might go out if the storm gets any worse."

"Well, rather than movie night," Bart says, sitting up and flinging himself over the back of the couch. He lands ungracefully but upright. He leans back over to peer down at Tim. "Why don't we do sleepover things? Live up to the stereotype and all that. We can make a pillow fort, tell scary stories, and Kon and I can braid your hair." He grins at Cassie and Tim's collective groan. Bart goes to the kitchen and gets plates of food for everyone, still listing sleepover activities.

Cassie and Kon manhandle him into sitting up, and Kon wanders off to find Tim's antibiotics. His cough has abated, thankfully, but he's still struggling to get better. Tim leans his head against Cassie's shoulder,

and she ruffles his hair with a fond smile. Bart returns and hands Tim a plate of casserole—one of Ma's recipes Tim recognizes by the mouthwatering smell alone. Rather than sitting back down on the couch, Bart rests against Tim's legs, and when Kon comes back into the room, Tim finds himself sandwiched between him and Cassie. His friends are all mother hens. It's equally exhausting and endearing.

The power goes out midway through dinner, so they wind up scouring the apartment for all its pillows and blankets to build a fort. Tim sits in the middle of the couch as the others work around him, directing as necessary. When they're finally satisfied, the team crawls in to join him, snuggling as close to Tim as possible. Protocol: Sierra Bravo Sierra Lima is still in effect, after all, so they're feeling cuddly.

Kon starts up with the scary stories, and he's a surprisingly good story-teller. His voice is smooth, and his cadence rises and falls with the suspense. He narrates a ghost story he'd heard from a friend back in Kansas, which Tim follows up with a creepy Ukranian folktale. They carry on with the stories for a while, before the conversation evolves into more personal topics. The talk shifts toward old memories, dreams of the future, and the little things which make them who they are.

The Titans avoid talk of the Bats, and Tim's thankful. He lets them do most of the talking, too tired to really think about (the end of) his time as Robin or the empty halls of his childhood home. He's not sure he really wants to dredge up any old memories, and he certainly doesn't know what he wants for himself in the future. There's so much he doesn't want to think about, so he lets himself get swept up in his friends' voices. They're happy to make up for his silence. Tim drifts, surrounded on all sides by his family, caught in that hazy place halfway between sleep and wakefulness.

No man is an island entire of itself, John Donne once wrote, but Tim thinks he might be the exception. And if he's an island, then the Titans are his ocean. The thunder rolls outside as the lightning splits open the sky, and Tim drifts.

The Most Dangerous Game

Chapter Summary

The Red Hood goes hunting

Chapter Notes

TBH it's kind of a miracle I was able to update this on time. Someone please remind me why on earth I thought it would be a good idea to pursue a degree in engineering lol.

Jason Todd can be summed up in one word: sharp. Sharp mind with a sharper tongue. Sharpness in even his features—the cut of his jaw, the curve of his mouth, his narrow, straight nose, the slant of his eyes, the tilt of his eyebrows. He's all harsh lines and jagged edges—a sharpened weapon carefully honed to kill.

Jason knows it's probably more than a little fucked up to enjoy the feeling of bone cracking beneath his fists, but he can't find it within himself to mind. His knuckles connect with the jaw of the man he's fighting, and he laughs aloud. It's an awful sound, but it spills from him easily as the guy stumbles, swearing through bloodied teeth.

He's one of the Horsemen's grunts—inconsequential at first glance, but he'd been the first point of contact between his bosses and Thanatos. He'd brokered the deal to kill Tim, so Hood's just paying him back. With interest. He draws one of his handguns and fires at the guy's kneecap with deadly accuracy.

"Gimme a location, shithead," Hood growls, crouching next to the guy where he'd crumpled on the filthy asphalt. "Where did ya make the deal?" The guy hesitates just long enough for Hood to holster his gun and draw his Kris, and then he starts talking at a rapid-fire pace. The words can't escape him quickly enough. He gives an address to a hotel and the room number, and Hood relays the information directly to Red.

“I’ve got the name,” Red says a moment later. “The alias he was using is one I hadn’t seen before, but it does follow his usual pattern.” Hood hears him typing at his keyboard for another few seconds before he continues. “The name Daniel Hansford got us a hit. He checked into a hotel yesterday evening. Security footage picks him up leaving the building thirty minutes later. He’s been smart enough to use public transit, but laying out a false trail for the Horsemen isn’t as clever as he thinks it is, not with us on his heels.”

“He’s throwin’ off the Horsemen, but what’s he doin’ to mislead the Bats?”

“He won’t be operating under the assumption the Bats will be pursuing him for anything other than his prison break. Low priority, relatively speaking,” Red says primly. Hood growls low in his throat, and Red sighs. “Relax, Hood.”

“Not fuckin’ likely,” he grumbles. He stands and calls the GCPD to pick up the thug he’s knocked unconscious and zip-tied. “So how do we find him?”

“I’m following traffic camera footage,” Red replies. “The only other lead we had with Hawethorne’s aliases fell through, so hopefully we’ll be able to figure out where he’s holed up.” He sounds frustrated, and Hood nearly winces in sympathy. Nearly a week under full lockdown has his nerves frayed, and the one lead they’d been following had gone nowhere. They’re lucky Tim has the patience of a saint.

Hood makes his way to a nearby rooftop and waits for the police to pick up the grunt. His attention drifts to the skyline, stark and grimly beautiful. He takes his helmet off and reaches for the pack of cigarettes tucked in one of his jacket’s pockets. He breathes in the cold Gotham air, the stale smell of cheap liquor, gunpowder, and diesel drifting toward him as he lights a cigarette and brings it to his lips.

He waits, smoke curling in the air. Red Robin returns to the comms after a few minutes, and he sounds smug when he speaks. He lists off an address and tells him to enjoy hunting. Hood snorts and stubs out his cigarette against the concrete ledge of the roof. He checks his weapons and heads off. He elects to swing across the rooftops, rather than moving by the streets below.

He and Red maintain light conversation over the comms as Hood crosses the city toward the house Hawethorne's renting. Hood lands on a fire escape across the street, studying the building for signs of life. Thick curtains obscure his view, but after a moment, one of them shifts aside, just enough for a face to peek through. It's Hawthorne. Underneath the helmet, Jason's grin is wicked, dripping with malicious intent.

"How do ya want me to play this, Little Red?" There's a burst of static, and a new voice answers him.

"Give him hell," Kon practically snarls into the comm. Jason snorts and gives the affirmative. He casts one more glance toward the window and draws one of his firearms.

Thanatos is well trained, that much he knows, but Hood has the element of surprise on his side, so he waits, eyes trained on the gap left between the curtains for a glimpse of his target. He readies his rifle, thankful he'd had the foresight to bring it with him, and aims at the sliver of the apartment visible to him. Hood waits, utterly still, until he spots Hawthorne moving past the window.

His shot shatters the glass, and Hood moves to cross the distance, leaping through the broken window. Hawthorne's already recovered from the shock of the attack, and by the time Hood lands in the room, he's aiming a handgun at Hood's chest. Hood lunges, disarming the mercenary with a powerful strike to his arm. Thanatos draws a knife from his belt and swipes at him, giving Hood a shallow cut to the forearm.

“Come to drag me back to the incompetent idiots at the GCPD?” He challenges, dodging Hood’s retaliatory attack. “It’s not like they’ll be able to keep me.”

“Nah,” Hood drawls, throwing a punch with his uninjured arm. Hawthorne blocks the hit, but he’s not quick enough to dodge the kick Hood aims at his ribs. “Just here for some good, old fashioned revenge.” Hawthorne laughs, high and cold.

“Revenge? For what?”

“For torturin’ my little brother, ya fuckin’ piece of shit,” Hood growls. His next attack is vicious, a fierce swipe with his Kris that cuts across Hawthorne’s unprotected face. Blood streaks down his face, across his nose and both cheeks.

“Brother?” Hawthorne asks, mocking. “Oh don’t delude yourself; if I hadn’t turned myself in and led you Bats to him, the kid would be dead by now.” He raises a brow, challenging Hood to argue. The words dry up in his throat. “I considered running, once the Horsemen found me out. I was so torn, though, on what to do with the little bird. Part of me wanted to dump his corpse on the steps of the GCPD, so you’d be sure to see my beautiful handiwork, but on the other hand…” His smirk twists with wicked delight. “I thought it could be fun to see which would happen first: you find him, or the little bird *rots.”*

Hood snarls in fury, lashing out again with his dagger. He manages to stab Hawthorne in the side, between two of his ribs. The mercenary leaps back, swearing, and Hood advances, drawing a gun and shooting twice in quick succession. He hits Hawthorne’s shoulder and thigh, and the haze of green settling over his vision lends extra strength to the punch he throws at Hawthorne’s nose. The satisfying crunch of bone brings a savage grin to his face as he holsters his handgun.

Hawthorne reels back, and Hood pushes his advantage, knocking him to the ground and pinning him. He holds his Kris to the man's throat, but Hawthorne merely laughs. He lashes out, breaking from Hood's hold and picking up his own discarded knife. He turns and dodges the kick aimed for the wound at his side. Hawthorne throws the knife, and as Hood moves to avoid the blade, Hawthorne rushes at him, knocking them both to the ground. He wrests the Kris from Hood's grip and stabs it into his abdomen, twisting the blade with a cruel smirk.

Hood grits his teeth against the pain and pushes Hawthorne off him. The dagger gets wrenched from his stomach with the movement, and he nearly screams in agony. Hawthorne stands, crossing the room and reaching for a small remote. Hood's chest heaves as he scrambles to his feet, and Hawthorne watches with a cruel smile dancing across his face. He waves with an exaggerated movement and presses a button on the remote.

The small explosion rocks the building, and Hood dives for cover, swearing as the heat sears his exposed skin. Part of the ceiling collapses against his back, and he crumples with the weight of it. He can't see where Hawthorne went, but his biggest concern is getting out of there. He's injured and buried under rubble—not the best situation.

"Red," he manages to rasp. "We've gotta situation here."

"Hang in there, Hood," Red replies. There's an undercurrent of worry in his terse tone. "I'm sending someone your way."

"The rat bastard's gone," Hood says, coughing. More rubble falls, and something heavy and sharp digs into his leg. He's struggling to stay calm—fighting against the memories he's practically reliving. Smoke and agony and death. His breathing is harsh against the roaring of the flames around him. "Fuck, *fuck!*"

“It’s going to be alright,” Red says softly. “You aren’t alone, this time, Jason.”

“Hawthorne,” Hood manages to say past the panic, tone angry and desperate.

“I’ve got eyes on him,” Red soothes. “She’s almost there, Hood. Just stay calm for another minute or two, okay?”

“Fuck off,” Hood grumbles, but he has to admit to himself he’s feeling a little better. This isn’t Ethiopia. He’s not that scared little Robin anymore. He’s not been beaten and broken and brutalized—left to burn by that *monster,* and he refuses to die here. He’ll outlive the Joker by the sheer force of his own spite, if he has to.

Still, he can’t help but be relieved when the weight pinning him down lifts. Hood rolls onto his back to see Black Bat offering a hand to help him up. He takes it and stumbles to his feet, leaning most of his weight against her.

“Need help, Brother?” She asks, smiling gently. Hood groans, and she starts to lead them out from the burning wreckage of the building. She, as always, seems to sense what’s running through his mind. “No civilians.” Hood nods and sighs, relieved. She guides him out of the building, careful with his injuries and the weak structure clinging to its foundations.

They cross the street together, and Black Bat lets Hood rest once they’re away from the inferno blazing a path through the dark of the night behind them. Hood coughs and takes his helmet off, letting it clatter to the ground. He rests against Black Bat, forehead pressed against her hair. She pats his back gently.

“Thanks for the save,” he says after he regains his breath. Black Bat reaches up and ruffles his sweaty hair, smiling at him fondly.

“Thank Red Robin,” she replies with a shrug. “You’re hurt. Let’s go.” Jason agrees, exhausted, and scoops up his helmet, tucking it under his arm. She practically carries him to her bike.

“Hey Baby Bird,” Hood says into the comm. “Remind me to bring some of Alfie’s cookies, next time I come over.”

“Will do. Glad you’re alright, Hood.” There’s a pause, and Hood hears him typing at his computer for a moment. He hesitates, chewing on his bottom lip.

“Sorry the fucker got away from me, Little Red,” he says, finally.

“We’ve still got eyes on Hawthorne. He’s gotten on a bus headed for Metropolis. It...looks like he’s fleeing Gotham.”

“Why the ever lovin’ *fuck* would he do that?” Hood asks over the rumbling of the bike. “He stuck around Gotham because the fuckin’ creep’s obsessed with ya, yeah?” Red sighs over the comm, and Black Bat twists around to send him a disapproving look. She quickly turns her attention back to the road, but he’s successfully cowed.

“We’re talking about Thanatos, not Ra’s,” Red says with a snort. Hood doesn’t find it nearly as amusing, but he’s certainly not one to judge anyone else’s coping mechanisms. “But, essentially, yes. He wants to torment me or bring me to his side. I doubt even he knows which he’d prefer, at this point. I’ll keep monitoring him.”

“We’ll talk more, later,” Hood says. “We’re comin’ into the Cave, now.”

Dick and Bruce are sparring on the mats when they drive into the Cave and park. They look over and shout in alarm at the sight of Hood’s injuries—the burns, the slash on his arm, and the stab wound in his abdomen. The two of them rush over as Jason shucks his jacket, helmet, and mask.

“What happened?” Bruce asks, half concerned father, half Batman. Jason sighs, wishing Cass had just dropped him off in one of his safe houses, far, *far* away from the other members of their family.

“Got caught in an explosion,” Jason says, feigning nonchalance. He doesn’t miss the way Bruce flinches. “Oh, get over yourself, old man. I’m fine.”

“You’re hurt,” Dick argues, frowning. Jason rolls his eyes, but he can’t argue, because he’s technically correct. He lets Dick and Cass lead him over to the medbay. Bruce is already waiting for them, and as soon as Jason sits down on one of the beds, he starts to clean his wounds.

His siblings step away, and immediately, Cass punches Dick on the arm. Dick yelps, pouting at her in confusion. She levels a sharp look at him.

“For Tim,” she says, voice cool as always. Dick pales at the words, and he starts to stammer out excuses, frantic, but she holds up a hand, stopping him instantly. “You hurt him.”

“Dick isn’t the only one guilty of that,” Bruce says, not looking up

from his work. He stitches the wound in Jason's abdomen closed with steady hands, but he's tense.

"More than most," Cass replies stubbornly. She folds her arms and meets Dick's guilty expression with a challenging stare of her own. "But all of you, yes."

Dick looks away, and Bruce's frown deepens. Jason leans back, studying Cass with a wary eye. She's very clearly annoyed, and that never bodes well.

"Ya gonna kick all our asses to defend Tim's honor or somethin'?"

"No," Cass says, pouting and sounding frustrated. She'd probably offered to do just that, but Tim must've shot that idea down. "He loves you." She scowls. "Thinks himself at fault. Unloved." Her brow furrows, and she shakes her head. "Unlovable."

"He's wrong—so, *so* wrong," Dick says, voice strangled. Cass nods, unimpressed, and Dick hangs his head. "We love him, and he's wanted *far* more than he's needed. I just don't know how to make him understand that."

"Evidence," Cass says simply, coolly. "He's a detective. Needs proof." She sighs and puts a hand on her hip, drumming her fingers against the material of her uniform. "No more empty promises." She looks at Dick, who avoids her gaze like it's a brand against his skin. "No more attacks," she says, pointing a finger at Jason. He holds his hands up in surrender. She rolls her eyes and looks at Bruce. "No more double standards." Cass nods, seemingly satisfied, and turns, moving back toward her bike.

"Where are you going, Cassandra?" Bruce asks. He finishes wrapping

the cut on Jason's arm, the last of his injuries. Bruce stands as Cass turns back to give him a brief hug.

"To see Tim," she replies, smiling. Bruce raises a brow, and she shrugs. "Lockdown won't keep me out."

"Oh," Bruce says slowly, hiding his surprise. Jason thinks he's a little intimidated by her, sometimes—as he should be. "Well then, good luck."

"Later, Cass," Jason calls, waving at her with his good arm. "Stay badass." She waves back and Jason grins at her crookedly. She punches Dick again, before she gives him a hug, too.

"Love you," she tells them, moving away once more. She starts up her bike and drives off. The Cave falls silent as the roar of the engine fades with distance.

"Well," Jason says brightly. "That was terrifying. I'm gonna take a nap."

The Red Rider and The Pale Rider

Chapter Summary

The Two Horsemen are finally revealed

Three hours before lockdown lifts, the Perch receives a surprise guest. Tim isn't too concerned by the security breach, but the Titans are in full crisis mode by the time he's able to explain who's most likely broken in. Kon stays focused solely on keeping his teammate safe with single-minded ferocity, despite the reassurance. His other friends trust Tim at his word, but they keep their guard up, just in case. Tim just rolls his eyes as he and the Titans wait for Cass to make her way upstairs.

When she emerges from Tim's operations center, she smiles at him, warm and so genuinely *happy* to see him, and it makes his heart hurt a little. He vaguely notices his team leaving them to their reunion, drifting to other corners of the apartment, since they've confirmed there isn't a threat. Cass pulls him into a hug, holding him close for a long moment. He buries his face in her hair and breathes in the one person in the world he's always had by his side.

"Hi Brother," she says, stepping back. "Missed you." She tilts her head to the side, her smile growing more sly. "Nice hoodie." Tim looks down at himself and recognizes it as the one she'd left at his apartment the last time she visited. He laughs as she ruffles his hair affectionately.

"I missed you too, Cass," Tim says. He means it, truly. Cass is the only Bat whose care for him he can trust fully. He knows she loves him, just as much as he loves her. She's his sister, his only family, aside from his Team. "Why are you here? Is there something you need a hand with? Are you okay?"

"Tim," she replies, frowning at him in disapproval. She reaches up and

pats his cheek. “I’m here for *you.* I’m okay. You were hurt. ”

“I’m fine,” he says, trying to soothe away the worried lines on her face. “Is Jason alright?” She nods, though the troubled expression remains.

“Injured, but not badly. He’s angry with himself.”

“What?” Tim raises a brow. “Why?”

“Thanatos got away,” she says simply, and Tim sighs, understanding.

“I’ll call him later,” he assures her. “He needs to know it wasn’t his fault.” He breathes out a sigh and grumbles under his breath. “Idiot.” Cass smiles cryptically at him. She loops her arm through his and guides him to the couch.

“Brothers are idiots,” she says sagely. “They hurt you.” She fixes him with a look, one that Tim knows means he needs to start talking. He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “I punched Dick,” she offers after his continued silence. “Twice.” Tim snorts and shoots a grateful smile at her. She puts a hand on his shoulder. “Talk to me?”

“I don’t really know what to say,” Tim admits. “After everything with Thanatos, they’ve been acting...like they care? I guess?” He absentmindedly tugs at a stray strand of his hair. “I don’t understand what changed. It’s not like anything’s *different* now. I just got a little fucked up by a creepy mercenary. It happens. I don’t understand why the Bats are suddenly pretending to give a shit. Not when they’ve already made it clear they don’t. It’s not necessary, and honestly? It’s a little insulting.”

“How?”

“Well, Dick wants to ‘make things right,’ somehow. Like he finally realizes I don’t bother with talking to him anymore, and he just can’t bear to have someone see him as less than perfect.” He clasps his hands together, resting his forearms against his thighs, and stares down at his intertwined fingers. “It took me getting kidnapped and tortured for them to understand how little I can count on them. And even then, they couldn’t even figure it out themselves; no, they needed Thanatos to tell them I was gone. They didn’t notice because they don’t care.”

“Blind,” Cass says, and the sadness on her face breaks Tim’s heart. “Not…” She pauses, struggling with what to say. Tim waits patiently, knowing how she still takes her time to find the right words to articulate her thoughts. “They underestimate your heart.” He closes his eyes, shoulders slumping. Cass’ grip tightens, a steadying pressure against the suffocating weight of his thoughts.

“What do you mean, Cass?”

“Your heart is big,” she says, haltingly. She taps a finger against his chest. “Leaves bigger scars.” Tim sighs and buries his face in his hands.

“I can’t help but wonder...if Thanatos hadn’t told them, would they have ever realized I was gone?” His breath stutters out of him. “I could be dead in that basement by now, and they might still not have known it.”

“You blame yourself,” Cass says, voice soft and gentle. It reminds Tim of summer rain showers.

“Neither my parents nor the Bats ever cared for me,” he replies. “I’m the common factor, so why shouldn’t I blame yourself? People I love either don’t give a shit about me in return, or they die. God, Cass, sometimes I feel like I’m poison. The smart ones stay away. The good ones get killed.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, there's a sudden presence on his other side. Tim opens his eyes to see Kon glaring at him with an intensity he usually only sees in battle. Kon loops his arms around Tim and drags him into a tight hug. Tim, completely confused, wraps his arms around his friend’s back.

“Don’t talk about yourself like that,” Kon says in a low growl. “Don’t you fucking dare do that. You’re not poison, Tim. You’re one of the best people I know.”

“Agreed,” Cass says. She joins the hug, too, and Tim can feel the trembling of her hands as they rest against his chest. “You’re so good. So good.” Tim sighs, but he doesn’t argue. He does wish he could agree with them, though. They stay there in the quiet for a time, until the Perch’s system sends an alert to Tim’s phone.

With Thanatos out of Gotham, once lockdown lifts, Tim doesn’t bother to reset it. His team tries to fight him on the issue, but Tim’s stubbornness works with his cold pragmatism to win the argument. The *real* problem comes when Tim tries to convince his team to let him go out. He’s *finally* got a solid hit on the identities of the Two Horsemen, and he’s itching to investigate.

The brothers Warren and Seth Ryder, aliases War and Death, own a club which fronts for and helps finance their trafficking business. Tim wants to scope out the place, but his team wants to keep him at the Perch, at least until he’s fully healed from his time as Thanatos’ captive. Thankfully, Cass agrees to come with him, which shuts down the argument quite nicely, and the two of them carefully plan a night out for two of the Wayne kids.

Cass usually stays out of the public eye, but Tim's work at WE makes it impossible for him to have any sense of obscurity. It's annoying most of the time, but for now, he'll be able to use it to his advantage. He plans to flaunt his public presence as a means of hiding his true motives. However superficial and tenuous they might be, his ties to the Wayne family have their uses, at times.

Tim draws up a plan and sets their reservations for dinner. He'll allow himself and Cass to be spotted at the restaurant and the small, locally owned bakery across the street, before they move in on the Ryders' club. It's just a normal night out for two rich kids, and at least he'll be able to get some free publicity for the little bakery.

He emerges from his room, dressed sharply in a dark green button-up paired with grey slacks. Cass is already waiting for him, looking bored as she scrolls through her phone. She smiles at him when she sees him, though, and tucks her phone into her purse. Her dress has a high collar and long sleeves, to hide the evidence of David Cain's influence on her skin.

"Lookin' snazzy, you two," Bart says with a wide grin. Tim and Cass turn and send him matching flat looks, and Bart cackles brightly. "Good luck. We'll be on call, if you need us, okay? Keep in contact." Tim nods and gestures for Cass to follow him to his garage.

He selects one of his flashier cars, playing into the wealth and prestige he knows he has to pretend to live and breathe for the evening. He hasn't had a chance to enjoy this particular gorgeous work of machinery in a while, so he's excited to get on the road. Cass wags a finger at him, silently warning him not to go too crazy, but he just grins at her in response. She smiles back, knowing he's going to drive as fast as he can without getting them into trouble.

As expected, paparazzi are waiting for them outside the restaurant's

doors. Tim steps out first, handing the keys to the valet and opening the door for his sister. Cameras flash, and questions are shouted at them both. Tim smiles, dripping with charm, but he leads Cass into the restaurant without acknowledging the veritable bloodhounds surrounding them.

Dinner passes without incident, as does dessert. The bakery is fantastic, and Tim's glad he selected it for their second stop. Hopefully their visit there will advertise the little, local business. The owners are sweet, and the apple fritter Tim orders for himself is something he'd probably sell his soul for. He and Cass have a silent conversation as they eat their desserts, readying themselves for the real task at hand. Finally, the two of them exit the bakery and get back into Tim's car. The drive to the club is short, and the neon lights spilling from the door cast a bright glow across the sidewalk.

Tim and Cass are let in as soon as they approach the doors, bypassing the line of eager partygoers waiting for entry. The music is deafening, and the dancefloor is a living mass of limbs and energy. The heat in the room is intense. The flashing lights and the smell of alcohol make the entire room seem to spin, and Tim closes his eyes for a moment against the overwhelming assault on his senses. Cass slips her hand into his—a reassuring presence—and together, they weave toward the bar.

Tim orders two virgin cocktails for them, and they sip at their drinks and scan the crowd for any suspicious activity. After a moment, Tim taps the back of Cass' hand four times, and she tilts her head, gaze slipping to her four o'clock. Seth Ryder sits at one of the shadowy booths lining the walls, deep in discussion with someone whose features Tim can't make out. Cass nods once and slips out of her seat. He loses sight of her almost immediately, but he trusts her to keep a proper eye on the elder Ryder brother.

Tim glances around, hoping to spot Warren among the crowd, but he's sidetracked by the bartender flirting with him, even going so far as to make him another drink—free of charge. Tim engages in light conversation, and he manages to glean some information about

Warren's whereabouts. He left the club nearly an hour prior, which isn't unusual for him. If his pattern holds, he should be back within the next thirty minutes or so. He keeps up the casual talk with the bartender for a time, until he locks eyes with someone he recognizes across the room. He quickly excuses himself and nearly stumbles off the stool.

"Ooh, fuck," Tim breathes into the comm. He hears his team's alarmed reactions, which startles him into action. He crosses the room, blending in with the dancing bodies surrounding him, desperate to avoid drawing attention to himself. "Guys, we've got a Code: Gollum." He hears his team collectively groan in response.

He loses sight of the *complication* he's faced with while he weaves through the crowd. His stomach feels like a pit of ice as he scans the room as innocuously as he can. Tim finds himself mentally cursing with every single swear word in every language he knows when cold, thin fingers wrap around his wrist. He turns to match the hungry gaze of Ra's al Ghul with a bland expression of his own.

"Hello Detective," Ra's purrs. "What a pleasant surprise."

"What do you want?" Tim asks flatly. He narrows his eyes, pale blue irises turning glacial.

"Manners, Timothy," Ra's chastises with a mocking smile, as though he were scolding a small child. "

"Says the bag of bones obsessed with a teenager," Tim says, raising a brow. "Now, I won't ask again. What do you want?"

"I was merely conducting business with the Pale Rider," Ra's replies smoothly. Tim keeps his expression flat, uninterested, but he knows

Ra's is most likely well aware of Tim's involvement with the Horsemen.

"The Pale Rider," Tim muses. "Death, or shall I say, Seth Ryder?"

"Ah, so you've figured it out." Ra's doesn't sound surprised. "As expected, Detective."

Tim curls the first two fingers of his left hand toward his palm—a signal to Cass. It's a bit extreme, but he can't be too careful when Ra's is involved. He trusts her to get everyone out in time, and he knows she'll trust him to get *himself* out in time, too. From the corner of his eye, he sees her nod and drift away, toward the bathrooms.

"So, this business," Tim says slowly. "I didn't realize clubbing was your kind of scene. Are you hoping to invest in some strobe lights for Nanda Parbat?"

"Certainly not something as gaudy," Ra's says, scowling. The offended look on his face is almost enough to make Tim want to laugh, but the idea of the League working with the Horsemen is more than enough to keep his mind focused.

"Tell me something," Tim says, noting the smoke curling underneath one of the doors. "Which of your bases do you like the least?"

"Enough of this nonsense, Timothy," Ra's snaps. "I do believe we've had enough of your wanton destruction of my various headquarters. Your childish behavior is most unbecoming."

"Teenager," Tim reminds him, gesturing to himself. "I think the truly

immature one is the guy who keeps picking fights with someone literal centuries younger than him."

"And does this delightful conversation seem to be leading us to conflict?"

"Don't they all?" Tim asks, taking a sip of his drink.

"What are you planning, Timothy?" Ra's expression shifts into something sharper, more reminiscent of the deadly strategist Tim knows, rather than the distinguished businessman he presents to the public.

"The same as you, Ra's," Tim says coolly, a smirk drifting to his face. "General mayhem and havoc." Just as he finishes speaking, the first screams start. The fire alarms begin to shriek, and the dancers scatter, running toward the exits. Tim spots a few League assassins fighting through the crowd toward their leader, and he casts one last wicked grin toward Ra's before he slips away into the chaos.

Tim exits the club, lost among the sea of bodies, but he doesn't let himself breathe a sigh of relief until he hides within the shadows of an alley across the street and whistles lowly. Kon's at his side in an instant. There's a worried look in his blue eyes, but he manages a smile as Tim gives him a thumbs up and a tired smile.

"Cass?" Tim asks. Kon takes a moment to study the people streaming from the doors of the club. He nods, and Tim's shoulders slump. Kon scoops him up, and they take flight just as the building explodes in a bright flash of fire. Tim hears the shouts, accompanied by the wail of sirens and smells the acrid smoke, but they're quickly lost in the wind rushing past his ears. He spots his own car driving off, and Kon takes them back to the Perch.

Tim's car arrives shortly after he and Kon do. They're already waiting in the garage, and as soon as Cass exits the vehicle, Tim pulls her close. Kon had already confirmed she was okay, but seeing it for himself is far more relieving.

"Thank you," he says, finally regaining his breath. Without her setting and detonating the delayed charges, he's not sure how they could've gotten out of the club without catching the attention of either Ryder brother or causing a scene with Ra's.

"Of course," Cass replies, voice soft. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he breathes. "Ra's is just another problem to deal with. Sure, my to-do list got a little bit longer, but I can handle it."

"Not alone," she replies.

Tim steps back, nodding. There's soot on Cass' cheek, but she's otherwise completely unaffected by the fire. He's grateful Jason let them borrow some of his more creative explosives. Tim's already planning a few improvements, but they served their purpose quite well.

"Did you learn anything from Warren?" He asks his sister. She nods and grins, holding up a small recording device. Tim kisses her cheek, takes the recorder, and moves to his computer to analyze the audio from the conversation with Ra's.

He's about to download the files onto his computer when his phone rings. Tim answers without checking the caller ID, bringing the cell phone to his ear.

“Hello?” He says, absentmindedly. The fingers of his free hand still type out commands on the keyboard, pulling up the audio file and the program he developed himself to isolate what he wants to hear, filtering out the rest of the background noise. He nearly drops the phone when the person on the other end speaks.

“We’ve got a problem, Little Bird,” his cousin says. “Hawthorne managed to recruit Mavka. They’re on their way to Gotham as we speak.”

A Beacon

Chapter Summary

Robin gets himself into some trouble

It's 3 a.m., and Robin sits on the roof of a skyscraper, swinging his legs back and forth as he studies the skyline. Father told him to go home hours ago, but Robin had sent a message to Nightwing, using an old system they'd taken up while Dick still carried the burden of his father's mantle. Robin can stay out, have his space, as long as he checks in every fifteen minutes. Father almost certainly knows about it, but he hasn't stopped them, so Robin assumes it's okay with him, as long as they're careful.

Everything had been normal until Nightwing got swept up in an arson case an hour ago. Robin had been ordered to go home, for real this time, but he stayed out. His mind is too tangled up, and he needs to unravel the threads. Everything is so...confusing, right now. So many perceptions he had about his world have crumbled into dust, and he's trying to build the pieces back together with nothing but his bare hands, while strong winds whisk away the remnants of what he thought he knew.

Drake. It all comes back to Drake.

He thought the others agreed with him—finally saw that Drake didn't belong with them. It had solidified his place among them, the *rightful* Robin, the blood son. Drake's disgraceful departure from Gotham, following the disastrous attempt on Captain Boomerang's life, proved Damian's superiority. Everyone had been so surprised when, after six months with no sign from the boy, he suddenly reappeared.

Damian half-expected another confrontation with Drake, but it never came. He faded into a mere spectre, haunting the halls of the manor despite still breathing. Damian finally felt secure in his place at his

father's side, reassured once the threat of Drake had been obliterated. Now, he's not sure what to think.

Drake—the interloper, the Robin of convenience. Had Todd never died, Drake never would have forced his way into their circle. Damian hadn't considered that, though he certainly wasn't wanted initially, not only had Drake earned the right to take up arms with the Bats, but he'd also garnered Father's favor of his own merit, not just as Robin. He sees it now, the gaping hole in his family, shredded seams in the form of Timothy Drake.

It's there in his father's eyes, some mornings, when he sets out an extra mug, or in the way Pennyworth spends the third Saturday each month cooking, only to disappear for the morning the following day. It's prominent in Todd's demeanor, how he'd seemed so smug yet so *bitter* at first, and how a year ago, his edges had softened anytime Drake was mentioned. Another Robin left behind, he'd once said. And Grayson had seemed so happy, without Drake. Now he sees the gap, just as Damian does, and it's left in him a raw sort of grief Damian doesn't know how to approach.

It's...unsettling.

Part of him wondered, at first, if it was easy to cast his predecessor aside, simply because it's *Drake,* but then again, he spent plenty of time fearing the same happening to him. After Grayson had explained what family to him—real family—means, he'd thought it meant Drake wasn't a member of their family. He was wrong, and now, he doesn't know how to make amends.

Robin sighs as his comm crackles to life, his father's low voice demanding his return home. He gives his affirmative and stands, readying his grapnel for his trip back. He's distracted for just a moment long enough for the woman to land on the rooftop behind him without him detecting her. He turns, startled, and a shout leaves him as a knife digs into his shoulder. He leaps back, but the woman

maintains a steady grip on the hilt, and the blade wrenches free with his movement. Robin glares at the woman and activates his emergency beacon. He's not sure what he's dealing with, and Grayson has scolded him enough to know not to let his pride get the better of him, especially when it comes to unknown entities.

"Hm, you aren't the bird I'm looking for," the woman purrs, her voice heavily accented. It sounds Slavic.

"Who are you?" Robin demands. "And what are your intentions in Gotham?" The woman laughs, throwing her head back. Her long, dark hair falls over her shoulders as she does, moving fluidly like silk. In a way, she reminds him of his mother. She has the same, haughty look about her, similarly high cheekbones and the same cruel twist to her mouth, but this woman's skin is pale, and her eyes are dark as coal.

"I am Mavka, little one," she says, laughter subsiding. "My business here is not with you." She tilts her head, studying him carefully. "You will be useful; I think." She smiles and draws a firearm from the holster at her hip, firing three shots in quick succession.

Robin tries to dodge, but one bullet manages to strike his thigh, and he goes down to one knee, panting. He glares up at the woman—an assassin, perhaps—and watches as she returns her weapon to its rightful place and advances on him. She flips the knife around her fingers with grace and ease. The movement reminds him of a spider. There's a moment of heavy silence which is broken by the impact of boots on the concrete. A new figure stands between Robin and Mavka.

He's silent as he goes on the offensive, taking her surprise as an advantage. He keeps her on the defensive for a few crucial moments—long enough for her to make some decision about the intruder. She sneers at him, expression growing colder.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she says. “I owe you a debt of retribution.” The figure straightens up and stares Mavka down, unflinching. “I see,” she says after a moment. “So you have brought *him* to your side again?” The figure nods, once, and a gunshot echoes. Mavka clutches her side, teeth gritted against the pain as the bullet grazes her. “Very well,” she snarls. With a last, venomous glare, she retreats.

Robin has made it back to his feet, but he hasn’t gotten very far by the time his rescuer turns his attention to him.

He’s wearing all black, standard League garb. A mask covers the lower half of his face, leaving only his eyes exposed, shadowed by the hood over his hair. The only other skin visible is the tips of his fingers, where they peek through his gloves. Damian jerks back instinctively, and the figure steps away, hands raised.

“It’s just me, Robin,” says a familiar voice. *Drake.*

“What on *earth* are you wearing,” Robin asks flatly. He’s thrown off-guard by the blood loss and the overwhelming turn of events.

“Temporary identity,” Drake shrugs. “Call me Jersey Devil.” He sees Robin’s unimpressed look and grins. “Hood thought it was funny.”

“Hood is an imbecile.”

“C’mon,” Drake says, ignoring Robin’s harsh glare. “We can go to my closest safe house, and then I’ll patch you up. Okay?” Robin huffs but nods. He doesn’t really have a better option, regardless. He turns off his beacon, grumbling as he follows after Drake.

They trudge to a quiet townhouse nearby, and Drake uses both a traditional key and a passcode to unlock the door. They cross the threshold with Drake supporting most of Robin's weight, only to stop at the sight of someone already in the house. A moment passes in tense silence, before Drake sighs and flicks the lights on.

"Jay?" He asks, pulling the mask down from his mouth. "What are you doing here?" He frowns. "And what have I told you about smoking inside my safehouses? Take it outside, you Neanderthal."

"Well," Todd drawls, stubbing his cigarette out against the counter. "I *was* at the Batcave with Alfie, but then B came back, and he got on my nerves. So I came here."

Drake pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. He shakes his head and leads Damian toward the kitchen table.

"Just fetch me the med kit, okay?" He asks, and Todd shrugs and moves to leave the room. "Could I use your phone, too?" Drake calls after him. The battered cell phone lands in his outstretched palm a moment later.

Drake dials a number and taps his foot against the kitchen tile while he waits for the recipient to pick up. He purses his lips, tugging the hood down idly, revealing his messy, too-long hair.

"Bruce, it's Tim," he says, at last. "Just calling to inform you Damian's safe. I'm handling medical, and then Jason will most likely drop him off at the manor, after. If not, I'll pass along the address to this safe house tomorrow morning, and you can get him then." He pauses as Father replies, and sighs, running a hand through his hair. "No, that's unnecessary." Another pause passes. "I was involved, yes, but Jason was already at my safe house when we arrived. Don't worry, both of your sons are safe."

Damian frowns at that last statement. Something seems off about Drake's tone as he says it, but he's not sure what. He runs through the sentence in his head a few times before it clicks. *Both of your sons,* Drake had said, but there are *three* of them present. Drake continues to discount himself, and the way Damian feels when he comes to that realization is confusing. There are several different emotions warring within him, and they find a natural outlet in anger. He's about to open his mouth to protest hotly when Drake speaks again, sounding much more irritated.

"No Bruce, it isn't your problem. One of the two mercenaries on my tail attacked him." He closes his eyes, brows furrowed. "Yes, two. He called in someone with an old grudge. I'm handling it. Oh, and tell Nightwing not to bother with the arson case. That was me."

With that, he hangs up the phone.

"Arson?" Todd asks, sounding excited as he re-enters the room. He's got the med kit slung under one arm, and his teal eyes carry mischief. "Please tell me you weren't kidding." Drake shrugs and takes the med kit from him.

"The Horsemen investigation hit a snag. We might have gone a bit nuclear, but it worked." Drake grins at Todd, who snickers with unbridled glee.

"What did you *do?"* Damian asks in a demanding tone. Drake joins Todd in his laughter this time, though his is quieter, more subdued. He offers a faint smile to Damian as he starts to stitch up his wounds.

"Oh, Demon Brat," Todd says, wiping a tear from his eye. "You're actually poutin', and it's fuckin' adorable." He ruffles Damian's hair,

and he receives a sharp swat in return.

"Behave, you two," Drake admonishes. There's no heat in his voice, though—only mirth. "And to answer your question," he says, steady hands stitching Damian's shoulder, "I blew up a nightclub to get away from your grandfather."

"Grandfather?" Damian's jaw slackens as he stares at Drake. He's confused—very, very confused. "Why was he there?"

"To aggravate me, most likely," Drake says blandly. Todd guffaws again, and Drake sends him an exasperated look. "But he claims he was doing business with the Horsemen. I still have to go through the audio Cass managed to capture of their meeting." He frowns, worrying at his lip. "More complications got in the way before I could. Sorry about that, Damian."

"Why are you apologizing, you fool?" Damian asks. "You didn't stab or shoot me. Though, you would be well within your rights to do so."

"What," Drake says, more than asks. Damian rolls his eyes and casts a glance toward Todd, who looks much more solemn.

"Drake," Damian begins, tone heavy with annoyance. He catches himself and amends, "Timothy. I owe you many apologies for my prior conduct. You deserved none of the treatment you underwent at my behest. I would expect you to hold a grudge, but you instead chose to help me. As confused as I am by your conduct, I must admit my gratitude for it."

"What the fuck," Drake whispers, eyes wide. "Am I dreaming? Or dead?" Damian huffs, leaning over to pinch him on the arm.

“I can assure you,” he says. “You are awake. Now, will you allow me to continue my apologies, or will you insist on interrupting me once more?” Drake blinks and waves for him to continue talking, attention returning to patching him up. “You tried to welcome me, at first, and I took that kindness for granted. I threw it back in your face, misunderstanding your motives. You had good intentions, which I mistook for deception.”

“We got off to a bad start,” Drake says. His smile twists into something sad. Damian nods, once, and winces as Drake starts to tend to the bullet wound. “I understand.”

“Try as I might, I cannot ignore, nor *honestly* undermine, your many talents. You made the better Robin, and loathe as I am to admit it, I saw you as a threat. Hence my unjust and unprovoked cruelty toward you. It was wrong of me, and I apologize.”

“You were League raised,” Drake says with a shrug. “I get it. You didn’t realize not everyone has ulterior motives. And when you cut my line, was that just you falling back on your old mindset? Or were you more clear headed than I thought?”

“Wait a sec,” Todd interjects. “When he *what?”*

“Cut my line,” Drake states. His voice is calm, but his shoulders tense. Todd takes a breath, eyes looking just a bit greener than they had a moment before. He struggles with himself, fists clenched. When he finally uncurls his fingers, his palms are bleeding with crescent shaped marks.

“What the ever lovin’ fuck, Demon?”

“I was furious,” Damian admits, tone small. “At the time, I held animosity toward you, but I did not, in my calmer moments, want to kill you.” Drake nods, seemingly accepting of that logic, and leans back, finished with patching him up.

“I’ll admit,” he starts, chewing on his words with care. “You were part of the reason I stayed away. You might not have *actually* hated me, but the sentiment remained similar enough. No one disagreed with you, so I just figured everyone else wanted me gone, too. That was the primary problem.” He laughs, a bitter sound. It makes Damian’s stomach hurt. “And I was just expected to take it, *accept* it.”

“Assholes,” Todd grumbles.

“You wanted me dead, too,” Drake reminds him easily. Todd scowls, but he can’t disagree. Still, he folds his arms, an unpleasant expression gracing his sharp features. “Think about it,” Drake continues. “Two of my brothers wanted to kill me, and the other not only thought I was insane enough for *Arkham*." Damian doesn’t miss Todd’s flinch. “But he also admonished me for trying to defend myself. He put fixing your attitude problems above my safety and well-being. I was pushed aside by the Bats in more ways than one. What would either of you have done in my place?”

Damian doesn’t know how to reply. He opens his mouth and closes it, uncertain. He glances toward Todd, who looks lost in thought. Drake nods, as though he were expecting their silence.

“I’d have burned Gotham to the ground by now,” Todd admits, after a long moment. “Hell, I tried it once already, yeah? Fucked it up, but with all that extra shit ya dealt with? The fuckin’ Pit would’ve won out.”

“I would have regressed,” Damian says, delicately sidestepping what

he's really trying to say. "To my old ways of thinking, of seeing the world." Drake sees through him, as though he'd voiced his real thoughts. Of course he does.

"You would've killed, rather than subdued, the ones trying to kill you." Damian nods, sheepish, but he doesn't receive the admonishment he's expecting. Drake simply shuts the med kit and moves to wash his hands. He's quiet for a long moment, and Damian hesitates, not sure where he stands. He's uncertain and feeling more childish shyness than he's felt in years. Drake glances over his shoulder at Damian, his piercing gaze shredding through him, right down to the truth of him.

And then, Drake smiles. It's sad and small, but it's *there.* Damian feels himself shatter, like a glass against a wall.

"I'm sorry," Damian whispers, voice breaking a little. "I'm sorry." He buries his face in his hands, exhausted and conflicted and desperately sad. He keeps repeating himself until the words blur together. He stops only when he feels thin fingers wrap loosely around his wrists. He lifts his head to see Drake kneeling in front of him, face level with his.

"Damian," Drake says softly. His eyes have softened into something gentle and warm, and it's nothing Damian deserves from him. "I believe you." He bites his lip, but then he offers another smile. "It'll take time, just like it did with Jason, but I think we can put the past behind us, okay?" Damian nods, feeling pathetic, but he sees no judgment in Drake's eyes.

"You're my brother, Timothy," Damian says, choking around the lump in his throat. "I would very much like to make up for my past mistakes."

“Then we can work on it,” Drake says, voice soothing and comfortable, like a favorite shirt.

“You’re still just a kid, Bat Brat. You’ve gotta lot of learnin’ and growin’ to do, and personally, I think you’ve come a long way already,” Todd says. He reaches over and pats Damian on his good shoulder. “I’m proud of ya, kiddo. I’m sure B and Dickie will be, too.”

“Agreed,” Drake says. Damian is startled at the completely genuine tone.

“How did you and Todd move past your animosity?”

“We got our start kinda like this,” Todd says, leaning an elbow against the top of Drake’s head. “But we kept it up by workin’ cases together.”

“Could you and I do the same?” Damian asks, hesitantly, almost afraid to hear the answer. Drake smiles and nods, and Damian feels himself relax, sagging against his chair.

“C’mon kiddo,” Todd says, straightening and stretching. “Let’s getcha back home.” Damian nods and stands.

“Thank you, Timothy,” he says. He offers him a tiny smile, and Drake’s brightens at the sight.

“Anytime,” he replies. “And Damian?” He waits until Damian meets his gaze. “I’ve always wanted a little brother. I’m glad to finally have the chance.”

Thicker Than Water

Chapter Summary

> Tim and his cousin work together to take down Mavka's partnership with Thanatos

Nightwing isn't having a good night. He's already wasted an hour investigating a fire at a local nightclub when he finds a little bomb he recognizes immediately as belonging to Jason *"Don't blame me; Roy built it!"* Todd. He's about to call his idiot brother when his comm link goes live, rumbling with Bruce's low timbre. He orders Nightwing back to the Cave and informs him that no, his idiot brother didn't actually set the nightclub on fire. One of his *other* idiot brothers did. Nightwing sighs, long-suffering.

"Keep in mind, I've raised four of you heathens," Bruce says, sounding amused.

"Masochist," Nightwing grumbles back. "Seriously B, *please* tell me Red isn't taking pyromaniacal pointers from Hood."

"I'm not sure about that, but I did want to speak to you about Red Robin." Nightwing frowns but gives the affirmative, stomach churning as he swings across the rooftops toward home. He isn't sure what he's expecting, but when he arrives at the Cave, Bruce is sitting alone at the Batcomputer, dressed in his pajamas. They exchange brief greetings before Dick hurries off to scrub away the grime of the city from his skin.

He emerges from the showers a short time later, hair still dripping onto the towel slung over his shoulders. Bruce offers him a stilted smile. The lines around his eyes are tight, and Dick frowns at his adoptive father, knowing his microexpressions far too well.

“What’s wrong?”

“Damian got himself into some trouble.” He must see Dick’s terrified expression, because he rests a hand on his shoulder. “He’s alright. Tim stepped in, which is what I’d like to talk to you about.” He pulls up security camera footage from the roof across from where Robin had been attacked. Dick watches with mounting horror as his baby brother gets hurt, but then, a dark figure emerges from the shadows. The tides turn against Robin’s attacker so quickly; it’s almost dizzying.

“That’s Tim?” Dick breathes, stunned. Bruce nods. “His fighting style is different. It’s actually kind of terrifying to watch. Where did he learn to *move* like that?”

“Troubling as that question might be, that isn’t what I wanted to discuss. There’s something peculiar I noticed about the footage. A warning shot broke up the confrontation, but there’s no indication of who could’ve fired.”

“Jason wasn’t there with him?”

“He was already at Tim’s safehouse by the time the altercation took place.”

“That’s not good,” Dick says, frowning. He leans forward to look at the footage again as Bruce replays it. “You think Tim could be working with the shooter?”

“That’s what the audio from Robin’s comms seems to indicate, yes,” Bruce says. His lips purse in thought, and his eyebrows furrow. “I don’t know who it could be, or why they’re helping Tim, but they seem dangerous, from what I can discern.”

“Yeah,” Dick agrees, mind whirling. He studies the footage as it plays for the third time, watching as the bullet grazes the woman. “That shot was impressive. I haven’t seen precision like that—from anyone besides Jason, anyway—in *ages.”* He chews on his lip and casts a glance toward Bruce. “What do you want me to do about this?”

“I’m going to talk to Tim. If he isn’t forthcoming, I want you to find the shooter, but don’t engage unless absolutely necessary. Jason is one of the best marksmen in the world. We need to be careful dealing with someone who has skills comparable to his,” Bruce says, voice slipping with a little of Batman’s gravelly tones.

“You sure that’s smart, B?” Dick asks, leaning a hip against the console of the Batcomputer with a frown marring his handsome features. “Tim isn’t exactly happy with us right now, remember?” Bruce sighs and turns tired eyes on his son.

“I’m well aware, yes. I just want to make sure he’s being careful.” He passes a hand over his face, scarred knuckles resting against his chin as he leans an elbow on the console.

“Tell him that,” Dick encourages him. “I’m sure he’ll understand, as long as you respect his boundaries.” He smiles impishly at Bruce’s pained expression. “Don’t worry, B. I’ll be here for moral support.”

Bruce sighs again but reaches for his phone, dialing the familiar number and waiting as the line rings. He stays perfectly still as Dick fidgets, tapping his toes against stone and his fingers against his thigh. Finally, Tim must pick up the phone, because Bruce’s stiff spine relaxes the tiniest bit.

“Tim,” he greets, warmth creeping into his voice. “Yes, Damian and

Jay got here a little while ago. Damian is sleeping, and last I checked, Jason was having tea with Alfred." He makes a little hum as Tim replies. "Yes, I let him know. He's actually here with me right now. May I put you on speaker? We were wondering about what happened." Tim apparently acquiesces, and a moment later, Bruce puts the phone on speaker.

"Hey Timmy," Dick says, still feeling off-balance with his little brother. "I can't believe you blew up a nightclub."

"Technically, Cass blew up the place. I just asked her to," Tim replies easily. Dick snorts and rolls his eyes.

"Nice," he says. "Jason has been a bad influence on you."

"You sound so certain I haven't been an equally bad influence on him, too. Now," he says, tone switching to something more serious. "What did you two want to ask me?"

"We were watching footage of what happened and had some concerns. First, who is Mavka?"

"A dangerous mercenary I had a run in with a while back. She's harboring a grudge against me, so Hawthorne recruited her."

"Noted," Bruce says. "And the shooter?"

"My cousin," Tim replies coolly. His tone is flat, even, and eerily vacant. Dick frowns at the change, a warning to drop the subject. Of course, Bruce ignores it.

“I was under the impression you had no surviving relatives.” It’s not an accusation, but Bruce’s inflection doesn’t convey his intentions. He frowns at the sound of Tim’s irritated sigh.

“We’re not actually *blood* related. His ex-wife was my mother’s cousin. Look, I know this is probably too much to ask, but can you try to *trust me* long enough *not* to fuck this up by interfering? My cousin helped me take Mavka down the last time. We can handle it, and honestly, it’d be best if you stayed away from her. She’s much more dangerous than you know.”

“I didn’t know your mother had a cousin,” Bruce says, genuinely surprised.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like you actually bothered to pay attention to my family—or their neglect—until Janet was already dead, right?” Tim snaps. Dick cringes, and Bruce’s expression flickers with grief. He closes his eyes, and Dick puts a steadying hand on his shoulder, even though he himself feels as though he’s falling through ice and smoke.

“Tim,” Bruce starts, and only a Robin would hear the jagged edges of brokenness in the single syllable.

“Don’t,” Tim interrupts softly. “Look, I know circumstances aren’t ideal right now, but I’m working on getting both Mavka and Thanatos out of your city, okay? I’m planning a four-pronged attack right now, and I just need a little time.” He sighs, and Dick can picture him, huddled in an oversized hoodie, running a hand through his messy hair as he sits at his computer, a cup of coffee next to him. The mental image is enough to send a sharp pang through him. He misses his little brother. How had he gone so long without realizing it?

“I trust you,” Bruce says, finally. “I just want you to be careful, okay? Stay safe, please, and let us know if we can help.”

“I’m always careful,” Tim replies, sounding almost offended. “I always have a plan.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re always careful with yourself,” Dick chides gently. “We don’t want you getting hurt again.” His words are followed by a stiff silence.

“I’ll be in touch,” Tim says, voice going detached again, and Dick curses aloud as the line goes dead.

**

Tim nearly throws his phone against the wall after he hangs up on Bruce and Dick. His mind is working in overdrive, and he’s got a headache—typical of his interactions with the Bats. He knows it’s a gamble, not telling them his cousin’s identity, but he’s not willing to risk their reaction—not yet. He sighs and stands, rubbing his fingers in circles against his temples. Tim tosses his phone onto the coffee table and heads toward the kitchen.

He starts up the coffee maker, lost in thought and moving almost automatically. Tonight is the first night he’s been truly alone since his rescue from Thanatos. The Titans only reluctantly let him go out without backup, but his new alias at least gives him distance from the hunt undertaken by the Horsemen. Thankfully, the first part of his plan had gone well—mostly. He hadn’t anticipated Damian getting involved and injured, but at least everything else went as expected.

Tim pulls a mug down from the overhead cupboard and pours his coffee, taking a long sip. He’s playing a dangerous game, and his

nerves are fried. Dealing with the Bats on top of everything else he's dealing with is just too much. Damian and Jason he can handle, but Dick and Bruce, the ones he once thought he could *trust*? That's a far different story. His patience is worn thin from stress, and he knows he needs to be more careful with his temper. He can't afford to have the Bats actively working against him right now.

Simultaneously working against two deadly mercenaries with an unhealthy obsession with him, the League of Assassins, whose leader is somehow even *more* unhealthily obsessed with him, and a dangerous weapons trafficking ring determined to kill him isn't going to be easy. Tim is nothing if not determined, though, and he's got a plan.

He always does, after all.

Tim finishes his first mug of coffee and pours another, before moving back to the living room and picking up his phone again. With one hand, he taps out a coded message to his cousin and then texts the Titans' group chat to let them know he's okay. A spare laptop rests on the table, and he powers it up, plugging in a USB drive and waiting for the files to load. After a moment, he pulls up his notes, detailing his plan in a complicated form of shorthand he'd developed himself.

Tim and his cousin have worked to draw Mavka out into the open, and since she's made her move, they need to strike hard and fast, before she has a chance to use any of her nasty tricks to evade them. Their first order of business is turning Thanatos against her, which should be easy, considering she accepted the Horsemen's contract against him. Tim's phone pings with a response from his cousin, detailing a meeting place and time. He still has another hour before he needs to leave his safehouse.

Tim takes a deep breath, holding it until his lungs burn. He exhales slowly and lets his eyes slip shut. This isn't Ukraine. *They* have the advantage here, especially considering they know how Mavka

operates, this time. Tim opens his eyes and studies his plan again, scrutinizing every detail for a potential flaw.

It's calamitous, a work of absolute insanity, but it's a beautiful plan. At least Jason seemed excited when Tim explained it—and his part in it—to him. The Titans and Cass have his back, too, so he's confident. He makes a few minor adjustments to minor details and contingencies for working around the Bats, just in case. Once that's done, he pulls his mask and hood back up, snags a backpack, and leaves the safehouse, heading toward the address he'd been sent.

The Jersey Devil (and really, Jason somehow has both the best and worst sense of humor of anyone he knows) creeps along the shadows to the empty office building his cousin is already waiting in. He steps into room 308 and pulls the mask down, uncovering his nose and mouth. He grins a bit crookedly at his cousin, who looks both bored and slightly irritated.

"Thanks for coming," Tim says, already moving to the duffel bag full of weapons his cousin had brought with him. "I know it's dangerous for you to be in this city, so I appreciate the risk you're taking by being here."

"You're damn right it's a risk," he grumbles, taking off his own mask. "But I owed you one, kid, so here I am."

"And now we've got Mavka well aware of that little fact," Tim says, smirking. "You managed to get the copy of the contract, right?" He withdraws a heavy, retractable bo staff from the bag and nearly laughs aloud as it extends to its full height, revealing a separable mechanism which allows it to turn into a pair of escrima sticks. He tests the weight of the bo and grins. It's perfect.

He casts a glance back into the bag and selects one of the wickedly

sharp knives from the collection. Tim also snags a few shuriken and some smaller, throwing knives.

"Of course I did," his cousin says, folding his arms. "Why bother asking questions you already know the answers to?"

"Don't *you* already know the answer to that question?"

"Because you're an insufferable brat?"

"Got it in one," Tim says with a grin. "And before you ask, no I wasn't followed. With any luck, we'll take care of the other two mercenaries without letting the Bats know you're here." He tosses the backpack toward his cousin. "A new uniform," he explains. "The orange and black is too conspicuous for running around Gotham, so after we handle things with Mavka and Thanatos, you might have to change." His cousin nods, though he looks disgruntled.

Tim studies the building across the street from them, which his cousin had followed Mavka to, after he shot her. They're hoping Thanatos is nearby, but if he isn't, they have a plan to force him out into the open. Tim pulls the schematics of the building up on his wrist computer and shows his cousin the floor plan, noting all potential points of entry. They identify the ideal way in and ready themselves to move.

Breaking into the hotel is laughably easy, and Mavka's room, though guarded, isn't a challenge for Tim. Of course, Mavka isn't one to be thrown off-balance, and she's quick to recover from her surprise. She reaches for a dagger and hurls it at Tim, who dodges neatly to the side and extends his bo, readying for a fight. His cousin has drawn a katana from its sheath, and Tim lets him go on the offensive, waiting for an opening in Mavka's defenses. He finally spots one and throws one of his shuriken, grinning almost wickedly when Mavka curses at him.

She doesn't have any breathing room, not with the heavy presence of Tim's cousin overpowering the room. Tim retreats a little and watches as they carry on with their vicious dance. He sees her, after several long minutes of fighting, reach for a button on her watch, and he lets a feral laugh slip from his mouth, distracting her enough for his cousin to slice a gash across her arm.

"What are you two planning?" She snarls, aiming a high kick at her opponent's chest. He staggers back a step before advancing once more, and she dodges, making her way across the small living area and diving for the bedroom. She emerges a moment later, firing from a handgun she'd apparently retrieved. Tim rolls, dodging the first few bullets, but one finally catches him in the forearm.

He curses, but luckily, it's not his dominant arm. His cousin gestures for Tim to go on the offensive, and he complies. Mavka is already tired, but their new guest won't be. Tim swings his bo, knocking the gun out of Mavka's grip, and before she has a moment to react, he twists the staff apart and strikes her jaw with one of the escrima sticks. He hears the bone crack just as the window shatters.

Their guest has arrived.

Thanatos immediately charges at Tim's cousin, conscious of the threat he presents. He's playing into their hands beautifully, and Tim can't fight the smile on his face as he and Mavka exchange blows. Any moment now, and the trap will be sprung.

"Pathetic, Hawthorne," Tim's cousin drawls. He laughs, and it's a smug, *ugly* sound. "You don't even realize. Do you?"

"Realize what," Thanatos growls. He lashes out, but his attack is

easily, almost lazily, blocked.

“Don’t listen to him,” Mavka cries desperately, words garbled by her broken jaw, before Tim’s cousin can speak. “He’s working with the brat!”

“Really?” Tim’s cousin asks, tone condescending. Tim readies himself, and a moment later, his cousin draws a gun and fires. A dart pierces the skin of his throat, and he immediately drops. It’s a strong paralytic, but to the other two mercenaries in the room, it’ll look like a fast-acting poison. “Listen Hawthorne, I’ve got information for you. Mavka here is a two-faced bitch, and if you don’t want to take my word for it, I’ve got the evidence to back it up.”

Tim watches through glazed eyes as Hawthorne is handed the tablet with the contract—the one Mavka signed against him. He hears a sharp gasp, followed by a wordless shout and the sound of breaking glass. A moment later, he’s scooped up by his cousin, tossed over his shoulder.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

And they’re gone, out of the building and into the cold night. They head back to the office building where they’d originally met up. Tim receives the antidote to the drug he’d been injected with, and after a few minutes, he’s able to sit up on his own. He’s sore and aching, but the plan worked. The alliance between the two mercenaries has been broken, and now, they’ll be much easier to pick off, especially if their fight gets even nastier than it already sounded. Tim focuses on breathing and regaining control over his limbs.

The relative calm of the moment is shattered when the door swings open and Nightwing bursts into the room, a fierce look of deadly protectiveness evident on his face, even behind the mask. He’s already

got his escrima sticks drawn, ready to attack. His teeth are bared in a snarl. Tim would curse if he could, still half-paralyzed. Nightwing must've seen him getting carried away from the fight and assumed the worst. His fears are confirmed when Nightwing practically growls out a threat.

"Step the *fuck* away from my brother, Deathstroke."

Ukraine

Chapter Summary

An Interlude (Tim's six month disappearance, explained)

The hotel is dilapidated, walls sagging with age and peeling wallpaper. The doors are numbered with brass fixtures, and once Tim finds room 1206, he knocks three times on the faded wood and waits. The door swings open, and the barrel of a gun presses against his forehead.

“You’re a long way from home, Little Bird,” Slade Wilson sneers. Tim rolls his eyes and lifts a hand to gently move the gun away. “I’ve heard you flew the coop,” Slade adds, grinning like a knife’s edge. “Come around to my way of thinking?”

“Not necessarily,” Tim supplies, tone bland but cautious.

“Then why the hell are you here?”

“Adeline Kane,” Tim says simply, and Slade’s eye widens. “She was my mother’s cousin. Which would technically make *you* my first cousin once removed.” Slade barks an incredulous laugh.

“Right, and how did the Bat not realize one of his little Robins is related to me?”

“He only did a surface level background check on my parents,” Tim says with a light shrug. “Turns out, my mother married under a fake name. B didn’t look into it, but I did some digging, and her *real* maiden name was Janet Inghram. Her mother was a Kane, sister to Adeline’s father.”

Slade shakes his head, though he's smiling in amusement. He holsters his gun and waves Tim into the shabby room. Tim follows and sits across from Slade at the rickety dining table. Weapons are scattered across the surface, and water rings mar the old wood. One of the legs is shorter than the others, causing it to wobble when Slade leans an elbow on the tabletop. He studies Tim for a long moment, and Tim waits with a patience he doesn't feel. Slade seems to find something in his expression and leans back, letting out a low whistle.

"Damn, kid," he says, frowning. "What happened to you?" Tim shrugs; the heavy weight of the past year rests on his shoulders and shifts as he moves.

"Grief happened."

Slade nods in understanding, and Tim sighs. He feels empty, like a puppet with its strings cut. He hasn't slept in days, can't even remember the last time he ate a proper meal, and he's worn down and weathered to the bone. The stress and exhaustion has made their mark on his eyes—clear blue fractured like glass. He's too thin, pale, with dark bruises underneath his eyes and across his torso. Bandages surround his chest, wrapping both his ribs and the deep cut on his back.

After his argument with Bruce over the Captain Boomerang debacle, he'd thrown himself into an undercover case. He'd gone through the wringer, barely scraping by with his life, but he hadn't stopped until he was on the plane to Europe. He's still injured, still exhausted, but after everything he's lived through recently, he just can't let his guard down. He wonders what Slade sees, when he looks at him. Someone formidable and pathetic in equal measure, most likely—a fractured, haunted ghost of a person. Hopefully, Tim will be able to piece himself back together, or the closest approximation of himself he can dredge up from within.

He's not sure how many faces he has, anymore.

"How long's it been since you ate, kid?"

"A while," Tim says, pressing both palms flat against the table.

"Slept?"

"Even longer." Tim shrugs again. Slade frowns at his response and lets loose a sigh. He stands and slings a rifle over his shoulder, making his way to the door.

"And the Bat has just let one of his precious birds do this to himself," Slade says slowly. It's not quite a question, hovering in the ambiguity of a request for more information.

"One of *his?* Precious?" The scoff Tim makes mingles with an incredulous laugh. "I'm not either of those. Never was." He shakes his head, banishing his more bitter thoughts. Slade watches him with a steady gaze.

"Alright, then. Get a couple of hours," he finally says, gesturing to the bed and its faded, floral comforter. "I'll be back later with food." He turns to look back at Tim, looking impossibly small and far too weary for anyone so young. "And we'll figure out what we do next after," his mouth twists as he smirks. "Cousin." With that, he leaves. Tim stares blankly at the door for a long moment before he drags himself across the room to flop face-down on the mattress. He's asleep within moments.

To his surprise, he doesn't wake up dead in a dumpster behind the

hotel. The food Slade brought back with him smells amazing, and as Tim sits up, groggy still but on alert—primed for danger from the moment he wakes— Slade turns to look at him, bemused. He tosses a bag of fast food at Tim, which he catches deftly.

"Do you have any coffee?" Tim rasps, voice thick with sleep. Slade chuckles and hands over a chipped mug. Tim downs it, grumbling a quiet thanks, once he's done with the bitter contents of the cup. Feeling more alert, he casts a wary eye to his cousin. It's strange, having family, even if it *is* Slade Wilson. He digs into the food to ignore the thoughts of the Bats and Gotham swirling around in his head.

"Does anyone know you're here?" Slade asks, breaking the silence. Tim shakes his head, dreading the questions he's sure he'll be subjected to. Slade certainly looks curious, but he just nods. "Good. I'm not exactly staying in this *charming* little number as a tourist." He waits, clearly anticipating some sort of objection from Tim. He was a Bat, after all, but the Bats' rules of morality don't extend as far as they should. Tim's own principles have been cast in shadow for some time now, and he's not sure how far into the dark he'll let himself venture.

Tim won't kill. He knows this, but he's also crossed some lines recently he thought he never would, and he wonders how far the boundaries can be pushed before he breaks—a tree branch snapping under the weight of snow. He's adrift, cast out by the Bats, and he's still finding his footing. Learning to fly as Red Robin hasn't been easy, and without guidance, he isn't sure how far he'll slip. He needs to draw those lines and etch them into stone. Deathstroke's field of work might just be the best way to learn where those boundaries lie. The image of a murderous Batman, a future version of himself, burns against the backs of his eyelids. He refuses to let himself fall.

"I'm not here to interfere with your work," Tim says. "As long as you don't tell anyone where I am, we won't have any problems." He frowns at Slade. "I know you have a way to contact Dick, and I'll only tell you once how *bad* of an idea it would be to tell him."

“Oh?” Slade says, intrigued.

“Remember the news going crazy a few months ago over an international-scale government hack?” Tim says, grinning like a shark. He waits for Slade’s careful nod. “That was me. It took me less than an hour to install a virus into the government systems of thirteen different countries. Just because I *could.”*

“What kind of virus?” Slade asks, and Tim’s grin widens.

“As soon as a user logged on to the system, every single computer on the network would simultaneously come online.” Tim laughs, and he’s pleased to see an appraising look in Slade’s eye. “Then every computer on the network would be Rick Rolled at max volume.”

“You’re a genius, and that’s what you choose to do with your spare time?” Slade says, shaking his head. “Impressive.” He moves toward the table and drops his handgun onto it. He sits and begins the meticulous process of cleaning the weapon. “So, you don’t want Grayson knowing you’re here. You planning on sticking around?”

“Yeah,” Tim says casually. “That is, *if* you’re willing to teach me, *Cousin.”*

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

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Slade doesn’t pry, and Tim can’t be more grateful. He does eventually

give Slade a few details regarding why he left Gotham and went completely off-grid, but once that conversation ends, it isn't mentioned again. Life goes trudging on, as it always does, and Tim finds a new rhythm. He learns, and he learns well.

Deathstroke teaches Red Robin the art of deadliness. He's already a skilled weapon, finely tuned, but under Slade's guidance, he becomes something *more.* Something more fierce, more precise, more strict with his control. Every movement becomes fluid as water and striking as frigid ice. He's always been deadly; after his training with Lady Shiva, how could he not be? Now, though, he's more dangerous than ever. He knows exactly how to toe the line between agony and death, and he finds himself walking a tightrope, evenly balanced.

Slade takes on several mercenary jobs, and he drags Tim along with him—out of sight, but able to carefully observe. Deathstroke in his element is a terrifying force of nature, and Tim finds himself increasingly glad to have the chance to learn from him. The pattern repeats. They move cities when Slade takes on new jobs, and they train. It isn't until Tim has spent five full months in Ukraine, bouncing around from place to place, that things change.

Slade goes out for groceries and returns with a deep gouge in his side. His skin is already knitting itself back together, but the wound still looks horrible. Slade grits his teeth and waves off Tim's concerns.

"Mavka," Slade spits, when Tim asks what happened. Tim tilts his head to the side, confused for a moment.

"I thought that was just folklore?" He says. Slade sends him a strange look, and Tim rolls his eyes. "Mavkas are like the Ukranian version of Greek Sirens, luring men to their deaths. They live in the forests and don't have any skin on their backs."

“No,” Slade says flatly. “This is a real person. A real bitch,” he grumbles. “She’s another mercenary, and she’s apparently *very* upset I’m encroaching on her territory.” Tim makes a soft noise of acknowledgement and moves to his laptop. He searches for any information on Mavka, and after a moment, he has a basic profile drawn up.

“Kostroma Melnik, age 27, alias Mavka,” he recites, typing almost lazily with one hand. His free hand holds a cup of crappy coffee from the cafe down the street, and he takes a long swig as Slade moves to sit beside him on the worn couch. “Specializes in sniping and throwing knives.”

“How do you even find out these things?” Slade asks, shaking his head in amusement.

“I tracked *you* down; didn’t I?” Tim counters, and Slade laughs. “Now, I found an address for her place of residency, but I’m not sure how much time Mavka actually spends there. We can scope it out later, once you’re fully healed.”

“I’m ready now,” Slade says. Tim fixes him with an unimpressed look, and his cousin shrugs. “Fine, I’ll rest for a bit, but then we’re taking her down.” He moves over to one of the beds and stretches out, grumbling about Tim for a few minutes.

“Stop being such a grouch and get some sleep,” Tim snaps. Slade throws a pillow at him without looking, and it would’ve hit him in the face had he not caught it. “Nice try. Go to sleep.” Tim doesn’t miss the irony of *him* telling someone to rest. He knows his habits are terrible, but if he’s going to work himself into an early grave, he’ll do it however he pleases, thank you *very* much.

When Slade wakes an hour or so later, Red is already geared up. He’s been working since his cousin fell asleep, and he has a few plans in

place already. He lays them out for his cousin, and they decide on a swift but decisive course of action. Deathstroke puts on his armor, and together, the two cousins make their way to the address.

It's a small cabin, nestled in the mountains. The snow is practically knee deep, but the lights in the windows send a warm flash of triumph down Red's spine. He and Deathstroke split up, and Red goes up to the roof, working his way into the second story of the cabin. He sneaks in without any trouble, despite the traps laid out for intruders, and once his boots touch the floor, he heads for the hall. Hiding among the shadows, he creeps down the hall and risks a glance over the stairs' railing.

Mavka sits at her worktable, cleaning a sniper rifle and humming to herself. Red wonders if she's noticed him yet, and he desperately hopes she hasn't. The weapon in her hands would kill him in a very spectacularly *awful* way. Slade's knock on the door provides enough of a distraction for Red to sneak downstairs without being spotted. Mavka moves, assembling the rifle in a few seconds, and by the time she reaches the door, she's got the gun loaded and ready.

She doesn't even bother checking who it is before she fires, and Red has to bite back a gasp as the bullet tears through the wood and lands against Deathstroke's armor. His cousin strikes back in a fluid motion, breaking down the door and grabbing the barrel of the rifle before Mavka can fire again. He wrests it from her grip, tossing her to the floor with the momentum. Red moves behind them, readying himself to enter the fray.

Mavka whirls on him the moment she senses another presence, and Red has to duck before a knife can embed itself in his skull. Deathstroke draws her attention back to him, mostly. He has enhanced healing, while Red doesn't, so he does what he can to keep Red's injuries down to a minimum. She still manages to lash out at him when she gets an opening.

The wind howls from the shattered door frame, snow blasting into the cabin. The fire stutters in the hearth, and Red finds himself shivering despite his suit's insulation. He draws his bo, using it to deflect a kick aimed for him, twisting the staff to knock Mavka off balance. She steadies herself quickly and darts over the coffee table, snagging a fire poker and dropping the end into the flames. Deathstroke fires from the handgun holstered at his hip—once, twice—and Mavka dodges elegantly. She spins, grabbing for the poker, and lunges. She manages to find a weak spot in Deathstroke's armor, the heated metal cutting through it and digging into his abdomen.

Red lets out a shout, leaping at Mavka's back. He sends her crashing to the ground and uses his bo to strike her temple hard enough to knock her out. He rushes to his cousin's side, cursing at the chill and the icy tendrils of fear ripping through his bones. He helps Deathstroke to his feet, a worried frown on his pale face. The poker is still lodged between two of his ribs. Deathstroke takes a steadying breath and pulls it free. It clatters to the wooden floor, the sound accompanied by a grimace from the both of them.

"Let's get out of here," Red says, biting his lip. "Enhanced healing or no, you're going to need that taken care of." Deathstroke nods, and they trudge out into the snow.

The temperature plunges with the sun, and Red clutches onto his cousin, leeching off him for warmth while he uses Red to keep himself upright. The snow falls heavier, adding more layers to the blanket already covering the frozen earth. Deathstroke is nearly silent beside him, breathing evenly with sure steps, but Red shakes from the cold, exhaustion pulling at his limbs. The air burns as he inhales, and he idly wonders if his lungs can get frostbite.

"There's a cave ahead," Deathstroke says, after what feels like hours. "We won't make it back before nightfall. Best to shelter now." Red nods, and they stumble toward the cave.

There's a bend just beyond the cave entrance, which shelters them from the wind's bitter touch, and Red practically collapses once they move past it. Deathstroke sighs heavily as he sits down next to him, tossing his mask to the stone ground. Tim pushes back his cowl and focuses on staying awake. It's warmer in the cave, but he still feels frozen, like one of those ice sculptures he sees at galas sometimes.

There are pros and cons to surviving the night. Pro: he's still alive. Con: he's sick. Slade healed overnight, and Tim's compromised immune system has screwed him over, yet again. Slade practically carries him back to where they're staying, picking him up like he weighs nothing. Tim grumbles and gripes, but he lets himself be carried, too tired to put any effort into arguing. His lack of response apparently worries Slade enough to cross the remaining distance to town in nearly half the time it ordinarily would've taken.

Tim isn't aware of much during the trip back to the hotel room they've been staying in. Flashes of white, blinding in the sun, a steady heartbeat, and the crushing ache of his chest all reach him in his hazy half-consciousness. He remembers Slade setting him down once they get back to the room, but after that, everything is blurry and confusing. It's easier to close his eyes and let the noise and the ache drift past him, until he falls into a fitful sleep.

He doesn't claw his way back from the feverish daze for two weeks. He still feels awful when he wakes, but he's more aware than he has been in ages, so he'll take the minor win for what it is. There's a steaming bowl of soup sitting on the bedside table, next to a torn scrap of paper. Tim ignores the message for the moment, choosing instead to eat. He struggles to sit up, but he manages to finish the whole bowl, despite his aching throat.

He sets the empty bowl aside and picks up the paper. Tim recognizes Slade's messy scrawl instantly. There's a phone number listed—labeled for emergencies only. Slade walks into the room just as Tim finishes adding the number to his contacts list, and he raises a brow at Tim.

“Glad to see you’re finally with it, kid,” he says. Slade picks up the duffel bag resting on the other bed, slinging it over his shoulder with ease. “I’m getting out of Ukraine, heading for a job in Latvia. I think it’s time you got back to your life.” He offers Tim a plane ticket, which he takes with an unsteady hand. “It’s a good thing you woke up today. My employer wasn’t happy with the delays,” he adds, as an afterthought. Tim stares at him, surprised.

“Thanks,” he manages, after a moment. Slade shrugs but doesn’t reply. He just finishes packing up his belongings.

“See you around,” Slade calls over his shoulder, waving lazily.

And he’s gone. Tim sighs, leaning back against the pillows, and studies the ticket—a one-way flight to San Francisco. His flight leaves in six hours, which gives him more time to rest. Tim groans and rolls over, fumbling for his phone. He sets an alarm and falls back asleep, too exhausted to do much else.

Once he’s packed up and ready to go, Tim checks out of the hotel and heads off to the airport. He sends out a quick text to his team, the first he’s sent since he warned them he was going underground for a while, and settles into one of the plush chairs at his gate. He’s not sure how his disappearance was taken by the Bats or what they’ll think about his sudden reappearance. He especially doesn’t want to know what they’d do once they learn *who* he spent so much time with. The Bats linger in his thoughts, a worry over what they might think etched deep into his heart, but at the thought of seeing his team again, he’s not sure how much he really, truly cares.

It’s a surprisingly nice feeling, and after six months of no contact with the Bats, Tim finds he wouldn’t really mind some more time away. It’s not like he’s part of their family, after all. He’ll just have to forge a family of his own choosing. In his pocket, the phone with his cousin’s

number burns with an unexpected promise, and the buzz of notifications from his friends fuels a soft smile, which slips onto his face with a quiet triumph.

Blood of the Covenant

Chapter Summary

Groups converge, and plans are formed

Nightwing crosses the room, escrima sticks drawn and at the ready. His expression is feral in its intensity. He flicks the switch to turn on the electrified ends, and Red springs forward, fighting past the heaviness of the sedative still in his system. He disarms Nightwing with a few calculated strikes. Once he has the weapons in hand, Red stumbles back. Nightwing's jaw drops open in shock, only to quickly snap shut with rage, and he takes a step forward, fists clenched.

"Nightwing," Red growls. "Back *off.*" He reaches for the comm in his ear and activates the link. "Hood? I could use an assist at my current location. Protocol: Delta Foxtrot Uniform."

"Oh?" Hood says, a leer in his voice. "How'd Big Wing fuck up *this* time?"

"Just…" Red sighs, frustration bleeding into his tone. "Just get here as soon as you can."

"ETA five minutes," Hood replies. Red hears the roar of an engine and fights the impulse to sigh with relief. He takes a breath, strength faltering. His cousin reaches out to steady him as he sways. He gives Slade a grateful nod once he regains his balance, and Slade steps back and takes his mask off.

"I mean it, Slade," Nightwing snaps, ignoring Red for the moment. "Get away from my brother, or I swear—" He's interrupted by a snort from Slade, who watches with amusement, arms folded and stance relaxed. His mask dangles from the fingers of one hand.

“What *will* you do, Grayson?” Slade drawls. “Kill me?” He shakes his head, condescending. “And the last time I checked, you only had time for your other brothers. My cousin here deserves better. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Cousin…?” Nightwing asks, completely caught off guard. His hands fall slack at his sides, but after a moment, he reaches up and flicks the whiteout lenses up, revealing the blue of his eyes. “Tim, *please* tell me he’s just messing with me.”

He shrugs, pulling his own cowl down. He doesn’t know how to answer, because the response Dick wants from him isn’t the honest one. He’s a gifted liar, but he just doesn’t see the point, this time.

“Sorry,” he offers, running a hand through his hair, flattened by his cowl. “He’s telling the truth. And,” he says, casting a sharp look to Dick’s open mouth, ready to interrupt. “Before you ask, *no,* he’s not secretly working against me or planning to hurt me. He’s had plenty of opportunities before, so in that regard, I trust him.” Dick frowns, practically pouting, and Tim sighs. He’s exhausted, and his limbs still feel like lead. He really doesn’t want to deal with Dick’s issues with Slade right now—not to mention his own newfound guilt toward Tim.

Dick takes a step forward and carefully checks Tim over for injuries. He allows it, because he knows Dick won’t even *try* to be civil until he’s sure Slade hadn’t hurt him. Finally assured, Dick pulls Tim into a hug, holding him close. Tim is too tired to really care, even though the contact feels odd to him. It’s strange, how his first hug was from Dick Grayson, and he’d remembered how that felt for years after; but now, his brother’s arms feel unfamiliar. The door opens, and Hood lets out a low whistle at the scene. Dick steps back and tilts his head, studying his other brother with a curious gaze.

“What’s the deal, Baby Bird?” He takes off his helmet and tucks it

under an arm. There's soot darkening the white streak in Jason's windswept hair. Tim can smell the smoke on his clothes from across the room, and he wonders what kind of trouble Jason was raising before he called. He also wonders if he really wants to know.

"This idiot decided he has the right to be overprotective," Tim replies, grinning tiredly at Jason. "Also meet my cousin," he says, gesturing toward Slade. Jason throws back his head and laughs for a long moment. He slings his free arm around Tim, practically holding him upright at that point, and flashes a crooked smile at Slade.

"Oh, this is hilarious in *so* many ways. Please, take a moment to imagine B's face when he finds out," Jason says. Tim rolls his eyes, but he's fighting a laugh, too. Jason ruffles his hair before turning his attention back to their older brother. "Alright Dickwing," Jason continues, pointing a finger at Dick. "Ya need to back off if you're thinkin' of interferin' here. Little Red here has a plan, and it's a *damn* good one. Let him handle the details, and don't sweat the whole mercenary-for-a-cousin thing. Literally two of your baby brothers were assassins, and hell, I was a legit *crime lord* for a while. Don't judge Timbit here for havin' his own skeevy connections." He turns to look at Slade again. "No offense."

"None taken," Slade says, sounding vastly amused by the whole situation.

"I'm willing to take you back to the Perch to go over my plans, *if* you promise to keep your chill," Tim says, frowning at Dick. "And fair warning: one or more of the Titans *will* try to fight you." He looks up at his brother, still leaning heavily against him. "Jay, would you mind taking him with you? You know how to get past my security." It's a subtle insult, but Dick still cringes at it. Jason nods and puts his helmet back on, waving for Dick to follow him. The whiteout lenses go back down, and Nightwing follows Hood outside.

Tim sighs, grateful for the temporary break from running interference

between his eldest brother and his cousin. He wants to sleep for a year, at this point. He'll be lucky to get an hour of rest tonight, though. The unmistakable pull of a headache starts behind his eyes, and Tim sighs. It's a weighted sound, tumbling into the air around them like an anchor. Slade offers a sympathetic pat on the shoulder and leads them back out into the stark chill and oppressive gloom of the night.

The ride back to the Perch isn't long, but it gives Tim a chance to doze a little. He leans his head against the glass of the window and lets his eyes slip shut. After some time, Hood calls him over the comm link, startling him upright.

"I think we should have B and the Bat Brat join us for this conversation," he says, tone stilted with uncertainty. "Should I let them know?" Tim hums a sluggish agreement, and Hood sighs. "Roger that, Baby Bird. I'll call 'em over." Tim rests his head back against the cold window, looking out without really taking in the sights. They get back to the Perch quickly enough, and Tim gets them past his security and into his underground garage.

The Titans are already waiting in his living room with Jason and Dick. A black eye already mars Dick's face, and Tim idly wonders which of his friends punched him. They all give him innocent smiles, and Jason looks more than a little proud of them. Tim trudges in, and though the Titans eye Slade warily, they don't speak up. They do hover a little, making sure he's okay. Slade steps away with Tim's backpack, returning a few minutes later in the civvies Tim had brought him, and Tim decides to follow his cousin's lead. He retreats to his room to change into comfortable clothes, carefully dismantling Red Robin, piece by piece.

When Bruce and Damian arrive, a few minutes later, the group gathers around Tim's living room to hear the plan. Tim's problems are a complicated, tangled web, but with proper coordination, he'll be able to take down each threat he's dealing with in a timely manner. He takes a breath, studying the faces in the room, and begins to lay out the basic outline for them.

“We have four teams and four targets. The Bats—Batman, Nightwing, and Robin—will handle the League of Assassins. They intend to meet with the Horsemen’s lackeys to purchase a biochemical weapon. Oracle is helping Black Bat and Batgirl track down Mavka as we speak. She’s most likely already injured from her altercation with Thanatos, so I’m not anticipating her giving the girls any trouble. The Titans will take on the Two Horsemen; now that we know where they keep their headquarters, they should be able to find enough evidence to take them down. Finally, Red Hood, Deathstroke, and I will deal with Thanatos.”

Jason lets out a triumphant crow of laughter. He pumps his fist in the air, eyes brimming with excitement. The others watch him with a mixture of amusement and mild concern. His wild energy bursts from him like curls of fire with each breath.

“Hell yes! I get to help take that fucker *down.* Revenge is a dish best served cold and all that. Cold like a fuckin’ *morgue,* yeah?” He says with a wicked grin.

“Jason, *no.”* Tim says, burying his face in his hands. He can’t believe Jason is making Star Trek references while talking about literal murder, but really, it isn’t that surprising.

“Jason, *yes,”* Jason counters, laughing. Tim shakes his head, simultaneously exasperated and fond. “Aw, don’t worry, Baby Bird.” He reaches over and ruffles Tim’s already unruly hair. “I won’t fuck up your plans. Promise.” He pauses for a minute and shrugs. “Well,” he drawls slowly. “I won’t fuck up your plans, unless we have to improvise.”

“Fair enough,” Tim says with a shrug. Jason cackles, and Tim feels a hand close around his arm, rough calluses digging into his skin. He turns to meet the cool gaze of his former mentor, and his stomach

sinks. Bruce takes him aside, a stern frown on his face. Tim knows what he's about to say, and his eyes are glacial as they meet Bruce's. He's challenging, defiant, but he feels white-hot anger surge through him at the thought of what's churning around in Bruce's head.

"Putting Deathstroke on a team with Red Hood is a risky move," Bruce starts. "They've both proven many times to be the most violent of anyone here. I have some concerns."

"Will you trust me to be a mitigating factor for them?" Tim asks. "Or, what, do you think I'll actually *encourage* them to kill Hawthorne?" He raises a brow at Bruce, daring him to voice his truth.

"You've got a personal vendetta, and you've made mistakes for similar reasons before," Bruce warns. "I'm not certain your judgement won't be compromised." Tim bristles at the comment, even though he was expecting it.

"Sure," he snaps. "Jason and Damian have *actually* killed people, but the moment I *plan* a murder, I'm permanently marked as a threat. I held myself back, in the end. I made the right choice, and I *know* which lines I won't cross. That you would demonize me for daring to want revenge against my father's murderer is condescending at best and hypocritical at worst." He lifts his chin, not quite glaring at Bruce's stoic expression. He sees the rattled look in his eyes, though, and his veins flood with a cruel sort of vindication.

"Tim, be reasonable," Bruce starts to argue. His jaw clenches, and Tim's expression only grows frostier. He interjects before Bruce has the chance to continue speaking.

"I'm not asking you to take a blind leap of faith, here. I'm *telling* you: my judgement won't be clouded, and you should understand—from all the evidence you have of my conduct from years of knowing and

working with me—I won't let my grudges interfere with doing what's right." He lets that thought linger for a moment, before he strikes the killing blow. "I've continued to work professionally with the Bats when you've requested my assistance, even after I was tossed out like *trash,* after all. Haven't I? That should be proof enough; I won't hold a petty grudge above my own standards."

Bruce reels back, as though he's been slapped, and Tim turns his back on him. He crosses the room toward the Titans, leaning heavily against Kon when he enters into their circle. Kon drapes an arm around his shoulders, and at his other side, Cassie's arms loop around his waist. Bart snags one of his hands and offers him a small smile. Tim can feel Bruce's eyes burning the back of his neck, but he ignores the feeling, focusing instead on his friends.

"The Drakes were shit," Cassie starts. The other two join her as she continues, "The Bats are shit, and Tim is *the* shit."

"Love you guys, too," Tim says, smiling. "Which one of you punched Dick?" Bart shakes with laughter as Cassie raises her hand. "Iconic," Tim says.

"I was defending your honor," Cassie argues. She pouts at him with all the grace of a petulant child.

"My hero," Tim deadpans. Kon cracks up then, too, and soon enough, all four of them dissolve into giggles. "Seriously, though," Tim says, once he regains his breath. "Thanks for being here for me. You guys are the best."

"Teamwork makes the dream work, my dude," Bart says. "We've got your back."

Tim smiles, a bit overwhelmed. It's such a strange feeling, being surrounded by his families like this. His family of choice holds onto him, a steady presence—as always—while the family who left him behind stands isolated from their tightly knit group, the continent carefully blocked from the island by the ocean between them. Then, there are those in between—Jason, Damian, and Slade. They're not quite family, but the wounds are healing, and Tim thinks he just might be able to learn to trust them once the scars fade.

The Titans see the gears turning in his head and let him go. Tim moves to the center of the room again and pulls up a map of Gotham on the large monitor set into the wall. Two locations are marked in red. Tim takes a deep breath, holding it until his lungs burn, and then he motions toward the screen, catching the attention of the larger group.

"Mavka can be taken down anytime," Tim explains. "She failed to carry out her contract against Thanatos, and it's likely the Horsemen have already negated it. Ideally, we'll take on the Horsemen and the League simultaneously. The League will be negotiating with the Horsemen, so if one goes down before the others, forewarning will make our job more difficult. Thanatos is an isolated player. We need to move quickly to mitigate the threat he poses, but once the Horsemen are taken care of, Red Robin will be able to move freely again."

He gestures toward the map behind him, pointing toward the two marked spots.

"These two locations are the Horsemen's headquarters and the drop point for their deal with Ra's. That deal is happening tomorrow night, so we need to be prepared to strike before the League can get its hands on that weapon. I'll leave you to figure out how to take them on," he says, nodding toward Bruce. "But I do have something for you to use."

Tim crosses to his coffee table and scoops up one of his recent projects. He hands it to Damian—a small, silver cube. It contains a cubic inch worth of wires, concealed beneath the six plates over each side. Tim's proud of the little device. It's a combination of two of his favorite hobbies: engineering and creating havoc. Damian looks unimpressed by the cube at first, but Tim can tell he's curious. He knows there's more to it than what he can see.

"What is this?" Damian asks, turning the cube over in his hand. He slides back one of the metal panels covering the frame and examines the delicate mess of circuitry within.

"A gift for Ra's," Tim says, grinning wickedly. "It'll trigger once it's within range of any League network."

"What's it gonna do?" Dick asks, leaning over Damian's shoulder.

"Access the communications system," Tim replies with a shrug. "Then play the entire Kidz Bop discography on repeat until I decide to turn it off."

"You evil little chaos goblin," Dick blurts out, jaw slack. "That's hilarious."

"Wouldn't be the first time I've done something like this to the League. Ra's manages to push my buttons in spectacular ways, so I like to take my revenge whenever I can." He laughs a little at the Titans' proud faces. "Last time, it was Tom Jones' 'What's New Pussycat' on a loop for a week."

"Truly devious," Jason says. He rests an elbow on Tim's shoulder, leaning against him. Tim sends him a dirty look, because Jason is *heavy,* but his brother doesn't move away. Jason catches his eye and

winks. “Hey B,” he says, and Tim has to fight the urge to smack him. “I hope you’re really fuckin’ glad this kid hasn’t gone dark side on us.” Bruce sighs, and Jason’s grin turns sharp. “Bet Timbit here could take over the world if he really wanted to.”

“Of course he could,” Kon says with a scoff. “It would take him like, an hour.”

“Nah,” Bart says, grinning wildly. “Forty-five minutes, tops.”

“That depends,” Cassie argues, tapping her index finger against her chin. “How much caffeine has he had in this hypothetical scenario?”

“As much as it takes,” Jason says, feigning serious consideration. Cassie nods sagely.

“Gotcha. I’d say half an hour, then.”

Tim realizes the Titans and Jason have, somehow, decided to do their best to annoy Bruce as much as they can. He thinks they probably decided they wouldn’t get away with punching *Batman* in the face—like they had with Dick. Hence, the verbal sparring. Plus, Tim knows Jason likes to be as obnoxious as he can when he’s around Bruce, so he’s sure it wouldn't have taken much convincing on his friends’ part to get him to join in.

“You guys are morons,” Tim says. The Titans pout at him, but he merely grins in response. “We already know I can create international chaos just with a free fifteen minutes and a healthy case of boredom. Give me *some* credit, here.”

“Aw c’mon, world domination in half an hour?” Jason asks. He props

his chin atop Tim's head, and he laughs when Tim swats at him halfheartedly. "I think we're givin' ya enough credit."

"Are we done here?" Damian asks with a huff. "This meeting has devolved into nonsensical drivel. I'd rather not subject myself to this any longer." He turns to his father. "May we leave?" Bruce nods and begins to lead his son out of the apartment, giving a terse farewell as he goes. Dick smiles awkwardly and follows after them, waving cheerfully. Slade has somehow also slipped out without any of them noticing.

"Thank fuck," Jason says, once the other Bats have gone. "Protocol: Alpha Beta is goin' well."

"Annoy the Bats?" Tim guesses. His friends all nod at him, and he laughs. It's a bright, open sound, and it has his team grinning at him. "Thanks, guys. I appreciate how petty you're all being on my behalf, even if you're all crazy."

"And yet, you choose to hang out with us," Kon points out. "You're stuck with us now."

"By the way, we ordered pizza with your credit card," Cassie says. Her smile is brimming with mischief. The Titans dissolve into fits of laughter, and even Jason's booming cackle rings out. Tim feels a rush of affection for his ridiculous, fiercely loyal friends. They're silly and obnoxious, but they're his, and he knows they'll never let him down.

Family. The word buzzes around in his head, bouncing against his skull with every other thought. Somehow, it feels right.

He's not even that mad about the pizza.

Frayed Edges

Chapter Summary

The Bats have tough conversations

Jason sits perched atop Bruce's desk, legs swinging back and forth as he watches his adoptive father's face twist with a grim sort of determination. He wants to sigh, but he knows Bruce will take it as an invitation to ask what's on his mind, and that'll only spark up an argument. They've been better, recently, about keeping conversations civil between them, but the scars linger. Jason's death and his brutal return—the self-righteous rage he swept across Gotham's criminal underworld, burning a path straight to his own downfall—left a rift between him and Bruce, and he doubts he'll ever be able to fully close the gap.

It's still surreal to be able to be around his family. He'd been a pariah for so long, a self-imposed exile he's only recently lifted off his shoulders. Sometimes, he misses the weight of it. A familiar anger simmers beneath his skin, and Jason struggles with himself to keep it contained. Bruce must see something in his expression, because he stops pacing and looks at him with concern in his blue eyes.

"What's bothering you, Jay?"

"Somethin' ya probably don't wanna talk about," Jason says. "Somethin' *I* sure as hell don't wanna talk about."

Bruce hums, and Jason has to bite back a sigh. He sees something in his father's eyes, and he wonders if Bruce is seeing Jason as he was—back before everything went wrong—if there's a little Robin sitting on the desk, kicking his feet after a long night on patrol. The image burns in the back of Jason's head, and he struggles to banish it back to the shadows, where it belongs.

He wants Bruce to drop the issue, but of course, he doesn't. He asks again, and Jason feels a flare of anger in his stomach. He's annoyed, but the more he dwells on what's bothering him, the more upset he gets. He's reminded eerily of his own issues with Bruce, back when he first came roaring back to Gotham, post-resurrection.

"Which was it?" He asks, finally. "Favoritism for the *'real sons'* or you thinkin' the kid would be too tough to take down, if he turned?" He scoffs. "I dunno which is worse." Bruce stays silent, so Jason fills the quiet. "Tim's a better kid than I ever was, but he hasn't gotten half the chances I have. Ya pushed him away after *one* mistake—one he fixed before ya even *said* anything. Is he that bad of a potential threat, or do ya just not give a damn about the kid?"

"Tim certainly has the capabilities to become a powerful adversary," Bruce says carefully. "It's not that I don't care for him, but naturally, I do want to keep him on the right path."

"He's done that," Jason snaps. "But ya kept him at arm's length, anyways. No fuckin' wonder he felt like an outsider."

It's ironic, really: the Robin Jason wanted to make suffer for taking his place was replaced himself—made to feel like he'd never mattered, just like him. Tim had been thrown out, treated as a threat, and Jason knows just how awful it feels. It had surprised him at first when he first made his amends with Tim, but now, he understands why Red Robin had been the first Bat he made his peace with. His replacement had told him, that night Jason saved his life, how he'd never wanted to take the spot of his murdered predecessor. He'd just wanted to preserve his legacy.

Jason had tried to kill him for it. He feels like he owes Tim this—making Bruce understand his mistakes.

“I never wanted another Robin,” Bruce says, voice strained. Jason narrows his eyes.

“Ya got one, anyways,” he replies. He raises a challenging brow, and Bruce turns away, toward the window. “And then ya took him in, after his folks died. He thinks it was all convenience. Was it?”

“No, of course not. He’s one of my children.”

“Why not treat him the same as us, then?” Jason snaps. He’s close to shouting. “Why doesn’t he get the chances I did? Or Damian?”

“Why are you so concerned, Jay?” Bruce asks, sounding genuinely confused. “I don’t understand what has you so upset.”

“I’m upset because I don’t want to believe the dad I knew could be such a terrible parent to one of his kids!” Jason yells. He moves to stand, hands curling into fists at his side. He glares at Bruce for a moment. “Because if ya could be so awful to the very fuckin’ *best* of us, what’s stoppin’ ya from treatin’ all of us that way?”

“Jay-lad,” Bruce starts, reaching out. Jason smacks his hand away, eyes dark with anger.

“You’re a fuckin’ hypocrite, B.” Bruce must see something in his expression, the poison green shade of his eyes or the curl of his lip, because he takes a step back.

“You’re not listening to me,” he says, and the stubborn set of his jaw makes Jason want to punch him. “I never meant to make Tim feel alienated from our family, but he interpreted my actions as such.”

“Can ya even hear yourself?” Jason runs a hand through his unruly hair, frustrated. “It’s not Tim’s fault for how he feels or the double standards ya put on him. The kid was neglected for most of his life, including his time with the Bats. That’s on his *parent* to fix, not him.”

“Are you implying I’ve continued to treat Tim unfairly?” Bruce asks, expression a mix between annoyance and disbelief. Jason scoffs.

“Not implyin’ it, B. I’m tellin’ ya.”

Bruce turns back toward the window, staring out into the pre-dawn gloom. Raindrops tap against the glass, sounding like light fingertips dancing across the window. A hush falls over the study, and Jason grits his teeth, not wanting to be the one to break it. He hopes Bruce will actually listen to him, but he’ll have to wait to see whether or not his words are getting through to him. Bruce needs to draw his own conclusions.

Jason paces the length of the room, footsteps weighed down by heavy boots, muffled against the thick carpet. Usually, when he’s this agitated, he’ll sit down and go through the process of cleaning his guns, but his weapons are still down in the Cave, as per Alfred’s rules. He focuses on his breathing, trying to calm himself down before the Lazarus Pit can sink its claws into him again. He wants his anger to be his own.

“I don’t understand why Tim didn’t reach out,” Bruce finally says. “He’s never been afraid to argue with me. Why not then?”

“We’d just gotten ya back,” Jason reminds him. “That was Tim’s rock bottom, B. He lost *everythin’* over just a few months. Plus, Dickie decided to live up to his name and practically kicked the kid out. It’s

not a huge leap of logic to go from, ‘oh, my big brother doesn’t want anythin’ to do with me’ to ‘no one in the family wants to deal with me’. Especially when ya come back and treat him like shit, even after everythin’ he went through to track ya down.”

“I was the last link,” Bruce says slowly. “I can understand that, but I didn’t know he was feeling so alone.”

“Ya damn well should’ve!” Jason snaps. “Look, I get it. Tim’s always been self-reliant, yeah? Not by his own fuckin’ choice, might I add, but ya still had a responsibility to him, B. Even if ya didn’t know anythin’ was wrong, it’s still your fuckin’ job to talk to your kids.”

“Tim and I have talked,” Bruce argues stubbornly. “He never said anything.”

“No, ya only talk to him when ya need somethin’. That isn’t what I meant.” Jason scowls at him. “Ya shouldn’t keep a kid around just because he’s useful,” he says, practically growling out the words. “We’re your *kids,* B! We aren’t just an extension of the fuckin’ mission.”

“I never said you were.”

“Then stop actin’ like it! Take off the fuckin’ blinders and start actin’ like ya give a shit about your kid!” Jason feels his nails slice into his palms, but he doesn’t even flinch as he advances on Bruce. “I know I’m the family fuckup, and I’ve given ya the most grief of all of us, but at least I’ve never doubted ya care about me. What happens when ya decide I’m past savin’, like how you’ve been treatin’ Tim?” Jason shakes his head, refusing to admit to himself how scared he’s been of that exact thought. “He only survived it because he’s had to his whole life, and he’s a strong little fucker. I don’t think any of the rest of us could do the same.”

“None of you are past saving,” Bruce says. “I’d never treat you as such.”

“You slit my fucking throat!”

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When the sound of shouting drifts into the kitchen, Alfred sighs and tosses the dish towel he had in hand onto the counter, moving toward the study to mitigate the argument. Dick swirls his spoon around in his bowl, watching listlessly as the flakes of cereal get soggy. Damian sits to his right, and his hands are curled around a mug of strong, steaming tea. His empty plate already sits in the sink.

Dick is lost in thought, and he feels weighed down with exhaustion and curiosity and guilt. He chews on his lip for a moment, deliberating, but Damian sets his mug down and sends an annoyed look at him.

“What’s wrong?” Damian asks. His tone is abrasive, but Dick can hear the undercurrent of genuine concern in his voice. He smiles tiredly at his youngest brother and drops his spoon, reaching out to ruffle Damian’s hair.

“Tim let something slip, the last time I talked to him,” Dick says haltingly. “I don’t think he really meant to say it, but it’s been bugging me.”

He tried to kill me after he became Robin, too, and you yelled at me for fighting back.

Dick doesn't want to talk about it, but he knows he needs to. If Damian still thinks Dick would condone that sort of behavior, he needs to fix it as soon as he can. But it's not something he wants to think about. His baby brother spent so long trying to kill his other little brother. Those days were tough on all of them, of course, but Tim was so isolated.

Dick blames himself. He doubted Tim, let Damian continue to verbally and physically tear into him, and he took Robin from Tim. He hadn't even had the decency to look him in the eye when he tore that last anchor away from him, leaving him alone, adrift.

Dick's breath stutters in his chest, and his eyes burn. He hangs his head, struggling under the weight of his mistakes. God, he'd messed things up so badly. He hurt his little brother, and he hadn't even realized how broken things are between them, not until Thanatos forced him to face the truth. Tim was right; Dick doesn't like to think he's capable of hurting his loved ones. He likes to gloss over his own mistakes and pretend things are okay until they actually are. He can't lie to himself anymore. He lifts his head to look into Damian's painfully young face.

"The fight you had with Tim outside the theater," he starts, voice wobbly. "How did it start?" Damian's eyes flood with guilt, and Dick's stomach twists.

"I cut his line."

Dick feels his heart plunge to his toes. He has to close his eyes for a moment, unable to look at Damian. His mind casts itself back to the last performance of the Flying Graysons. The snap of the sabotaged rope, those last, horrifying moments of his parents' lives, the waves of grief—they all wash over him in that moment, and Dick feels like he can't breathe. Damian had done the same thing to Tim. *Robin* had

done that.

He hears Damian's chair scrape against the floor, followed by the sound of the tap running. A cool glass is pressed into his hand a moment later. Dick opens his eyes and meet's Damian's worried look. His hands feel clammy, and he can imagine how pale he is. He takes a slow sip of the water, grateful for the momentary distraction.

Dick wonders how he would've reacted, had Damian succeeded in killing Tim that way. One brother, murdering another the same way Dick's own parents had been murdered? It would've probably destroyed him. The thought alone makes him sick, and he doesn't know how he missed something like this—something so awful—between two of his brothers.

Tim never said anything.

His grip on the glass falters, hands shaking as his whole body goes cold. Damian catches the glass before it can shatter against the floor, looking up at him with thinly veiled alarm. Dick can't find it within himself to muster up a reassuring smile. He drops his head, letting his forehead rest against the marble countertop. Damian pats his back, a little awkwardly. He's horrified, but he knows Damian has made so much progress since then. It's hard to reconcile in his head.

"I apologize, Grayson," Damian says softly. "At the time, I did not think how my actions would affect you." He hesitates for a moment. "You should know that Timothy and I have made amends for my behavior back then. He knows how much I regret my attempts to harm him."

"Of course," Dick says. He laughs without any humor. "Tim forgave you. I was the jerk who didn't listen to him at the time."

“Trust is more difficult to build on shaky foundations, compared to none at all. You shouldn’t shoulder all the blame, Grayson.”

“Neither should you,” Dick says. “Sorry I got so freaked out.”

“It’s understandable,” Damian admits, shifting from foot to foot. “Truthfully, I hadn’t made the connection between my own actions and those which…”

“Leave it to Tim to make us all look bad.” He offers Damian a weak smile. “He always was the smartest.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Dick stares at him, surprised Damian’s willing to admit it. His smile grows more genuine, and he pulls his little brother into a one-armed hug. Damian doesn’t even protest. He wraps his arms around Dick, and buries his face in his shoulder. Dick looks up at the sound of footsteps, and Jason walks into the kitchen, closely followed by Alfred. There are bandages wrapped around Jason’s hands, but more concerning, his eyes are a bright, acidic green. The anger he sees there dissipates when he and Dick make eye contact.

“What’s goin’ on here?” He asks. Damian answers before Dick can, twisting to look back at Jason without letting go of Dick.

“Grayson is in need of comfort. I upset him.”

“Oh,” Jason says, expression shifting into one of reserved sadness.

“You told him?” Damian nods petulantly. Jason walks over and rests a hand on Damian’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” he says softly. “Timbit already forgave ya’.”

“I think I’m the only one Tim is still pissed at,” Dick offers, half-joking. “Well, Bruce, too.” He studies Jason with a careful eye. “You okay, Little Wing?”

“Fine,” Jason replies tightly. “Don’t wanna talk about it right now.”

Alfred sets two mugs of coffee on the counter in front of them—black for Jason and served with an *unholy* amount of cream and sugar for Dick—and refills Damian’s cup of tea. The boys all thank him, and Alfred nods, smiling at them fondly. Jason sits on Dick’s other side and takes his cup, hissing a little as his bandaged hands come into contact with the hot ceramic. Alfred prepares his own cup of tea and joins them, sitting next to Jason.

“It will be alright,” he says, meeting each of their eyes in turn. “Master Tim just needs time. Yes, he has been hurt by the actions of this family, but he loves each of us, as we love him. He has not burned his bridges, even though he has had ample opportunity to do so, as well as ample reason.”

“He’s never stopped being here for us,” Dick says. “Do you think he’ll let us be there for him, now?”

“For now, he recognizes himself as an outsider,” Alfred replies. “However, repairs to his ties with our family are already in progress.” He pats Jason on the shoulder and nods toward Damian. “I believe you can remain hopeful, so long as you continue to put forth effort into ensuring Master Tim knows how greatly he is valued. He has gone without that assurance for far too long.”

The admonishment stings a little, but Dick feels encouraged, regardless. He takes a long sip of his coffee. The rush of sweetness clears his head a little.

“Thanks, Alfred,” he says, after a moment. “I know Jason and Damian have already made a lot of progress, but I still have a long way to go with Tim.”

“It will come with time. You boys have good hearts, all of you, and I am immensely proud of you. That does not change, even as you make mistakes. Master Tim has had less experience with true family than the rest of us have. It is up to us now to show him the unconditional nature of familial bonds. You three are his brothers, and as such, I trust each of you will do your best to demonstrate just how a proper family cares for one another.”

“We won’t letcha down, Alfie,” Jason says, slinging an arm around the old butler’s shoulders. Dick and Damian both give their agreements, and Alfred smiles warmly and pats Jason’s arm. He takes a sip of his tea, slipping back on his normal mask of calm professionalism.

“Now then,” he says, standing. “I believe we each have a busy day ahead, yes?”

A Devil in New Jersey

Chapter Summary

What's worse than having a bat in your belfry?

Having a devil on your back.

Batgirl's laughter rings clear as a bell over the comms. Tim, dressed in his Jersey Devil garb, sits perched on a rooftop, staring at the skyline. Dusk falls over Gotham, streaking the sky with dark blues and oranges.

"Oh man," Batgirl says into the comms, breathless and exhilarated. "Mavka is down. Black Bat, that was absolutely *beautiful* to watch." She laughs again.

"Silly," Black Bat says, voice unmistakably warm. The two girls confer with Oracle to get the police sent to their location. They continue to joke with each other, and the Jersey Devil lets himself relax and tune them out. The first part of his plan went well; now he just has to wait on the Bats and his team to carry out their parts.

The weapons deal with Ra's and his men will happen tonight. The Bats have already staked out the empty warehouse marked as the drop point, and while they interfere with the deal, the Titans will be attacking the Horsemen's headquarters in Gotham. Jersey Devil is on standby, just in case one of the two teams needs a hand. It's still too risky to go out as Red Robin, but after tonight, he should be able to take up his preferred title again.

Tim pulls his mask down to his chin and drags his hood back, exposing his face to the bitter wind. He takes a sip from the thermos he'd brought with him—filled with coffee, of course—and watches as darkness settles over the city. Streetlights flicker to life, and Tim watches as fog rolls over the murky waters of the harbor. He hears gunfire crack through the night and sighs, reaching for his comm.

“Gunshots in the Bowery. Hood, was that you?” He asks.

“Yup,” Hood drawls lazily. “Don’t worry your pretty little head over it, JD. They’re still kickin’.”

“JD?” Tim’s voice comes out flat. “Seriously?”

“Nicknames are my specialty, Baby Bird. Don’t question it.” There’s a shout from Hood’s end, and Tim hears him swear. “Aw shit, gotta go. Later.”

Tim rolls his eyes and returns his attention to his coffee. The steam curls delicately into the air, and Tim watches as it drifts away. He checks the time and frowns. Another twenty minutes of waiting before the drop happens. The Titans should be closing in on the base at any moment, though.

Sure enough, he gets a notification from Kid Flash a few minutes later, letting him know they’ve gotten into position. Using his wrist computer, Tim pulls the footage from Kid Flash’s goggles, watching what his friend is seeing in real-time.

“Monitoring,” he murmurs to the Titans. “Wait for my signal.” He taps a few commands into the screen, accessing the building’s security and creating an opening for his team. He carefully loops the footage from the past few minutes and nods, satisfied. “Now.”

The Titans move in as one. Tim directs them through the building, calm and confident. The master strategist has taken the stage, and he guides his team with a steady hand. They start to work their way toward the inner circle of the Horsemen’s gang, taking down the

lower-level guards and grunts as they go. Tim receives a notification from Robin as he's leading Superboy toward one of the offices on the third floor.

"Hang on," he tells his teammate. "Something's up with the Bats." Kon gives the affirmative, and Tim switches the comm channel to the one shared among the Bats. "Jersey Devil to Robin. What's going on?"

"There are more of my grandfather's men here than we'd anticipated," Robin says. "We might have to call you in for assistance."

"Got it," Tim says. He keeps an eye on the monitor, watching his team as they engage with the Horsemen. "Thanks for the heads up, Robin. Get back to me when you can, and be careful." He hears Robin scoff.

"I'm always careful," he says, tone petulant. Tim grins and switches channels again, checking in with Wonder Girl for a status update.

"We're handling things," she says, when he asks how they're doing. "Something seems off, though."

"How so?" Tim asks. He studies the footage closely, watching for signs of unusual behavior from their opponents.

"I dunno, dude," Kid Flash says. "They just kind of don't seem like they're trying very hard?"

"Shit," Tim curses. He stands and pulls his hood and mask back up. "Guys, they're setting you up. I need you all to retreat to the roof, and stay out of sight if you can. I'll be there in a few minutes." He turns off the monitor at his wrist and readies his grapnel.

“They’re setting a trap?” Superboy asks, sounding equally surprised and furious. “What kind of trap are we dealing with here?”

“They’re weapons dealers,” Jersey Devil explains, tone tight with worry. He uses his grapnel to swing from rooftop to rooftop. “Think about it. The Horsemen are targeting the leader of the Titans. It makes sense we’d make a move against them. It’s likely they have weapons at their disposal which can mitigate your abilities.”

“Um, I hate to tell you this, JD,” Wonder Girl says slowly. “But I think you’re right.”

“Get out of there!” He shouts. Panic flares to life in his veins, stealing the breath from him and pushing him to move faster. “I don’t care how, just *get the hell out of there.”*

He hears her curse, followed by a quiet sound of pain. The Jersey Devil soars across the rooftops, determined to reach his friends as quickly as he can. He struggles to even out his breathing as he lands on the rooftop the Titans were supposed to meet him on. Through the comms, he hears Superboy fighting someone, and he thinks Kid Flash is running—to Wonder Girl, probably.

“KF, status update,” Jersey Devil orders, working to pick the lock to the rooftop access door. He makes quick work of it and runs down the stairs.

“Assisting Wonder Girl,” he replies. “Running into some complications, but nothing serious yet. She’s hurt, though.”

“Superboy?”

“Oh fuck,” Superboy curses. “They’ve got Kryptonite.”

“On my way,” Jersey Devil says. His tone could cut through steel. He maps a course to his friend’s location, taking down two surprised guards in the process. He vaguely hears one of the men shout a warning about a fourth intruder, but he doesn’t let himself focus on that.

He turns a corner and spots Superboy, surrounded by a circle of men. He’s crumpled to his knees, clutching at his shoulder, where a green dagger is embedded. The Jersey Devil lets out a roar of fury and launches himself at the closest man. He can’t use his normal fighting style; it’s too recognizable, and he’s sure the Horsemen have been instructed in how to counter it. With the anger fueling his movements, he slips into some of the tactics Slade had taught him.

He manages to take down four men before they recover from their surprise. He’s a whirlwind of movement and rage. Somewhere in the back of his head, he wonders if this is how Jason feels all the time. He notices one of the men break away from the group to run for help. He retrieves the dagger from where Superboy had pulled it out of his skin and dropped it, throwing it at the retreating form. The guy howls in pain as the weapon sinks into his calf.

The Jersey Devil returns his attention to the remaining men, eyes narrowing as he stares them down. One of the three is foolish enough to lunge at him, making the first move. He dodges easily and uses the attacker’s momentum against him, knocking him out with one swift strike. He spins and lands a kick to another guy’s chest, sending him stumbling back. He leaps and lands on the back of the last man, knocking them both to the ground. A blow to the temple knocks him out, too, leaving the Jersey Devil standing among scattered bodies of unconscious men and the kneeling form of his teammate.

He helps Superboy to his feet, checking him over with a practiced eye. He's already recovering, color returning to his face and wobbly legs regaining their steady strength.

"KF, Wonder Girl, check in," Jersey Devil says evenly.

"You were right," Kid Flash says, panting. "They definitely have some nasty toys to use against us. We've got things handled for now, though. We're on our way to you right now."

His comm pings, and with a frown, he switches channels. Worry pools in his stomach as he waits for the signal to clear.

"What's going on?" He asks as soon as he connects with the Bats.

"Jersey Devil," Batman says, and he can hear the undercurrent of strain in his voice. "We ran into an unexpected complication. The extra League members were here because Ra's himself decided to attend this meeting. Nightwing is injured, and we need assistance."

"The Titans are having trouble, too," he says, feeling a bit breathless. "I'm already providing aid at the Horsemen's headquarters right now. How badly is Nightwing injured, and are any of the others available to help?"

"He's unconscious, bleeding heavily," Batman says. The words feel like a punch to the gut. "We need to evacuate him as soon as possible. Hood is occupied with a gunfight which got out of hand. The girls are still with GCPD and can't get away until the situation with Mavka is fully resolved."

“Alright,” he replies, mind spinning. “Will you and Robin be able to handle the League forces and the Horsemen’s dealers?”

“That remains unclear,” Batman says. “We’re significantly outnumbered, and with Nightwing to protect, I’m not certain we’ll be able to pull off much more than a strategic retreat.”

“Hold off on that, B. Summon a Batmobile to your location, if you haven’t already. Then, I’m going to need you to trust me.” There’s a moment of quiet, and his heart leaps to his throat. He feels strangled in those few beats of silence.

“Alright,” Batman finally says. “What do you need us to do?”

“I’m sending in my cousin. He’ll play by your rules, so don’t worry about reining him in. Just focus on getting N out of there, first and foremost. Get him to the Batmobile, and I’ll set a course for the Cave. Agent A can handle things from there.”

“Understood.”

The confirmation is terse, but it’s there. Jersey Devil breathes a sigh of relief and signs off. Then, he calls his cousin and explains the situation to him. Deathstroke agrees to follow the plan, and once the coordinates have been sent along, he heads off to lend a hand to the overwhelmed Bats. Kid Flash and Wonder Girl join them in the hall as he cuts the call with his cousin. The Titans move to an empty office to regroup and wait for the signal from Batman. Remotely driving the Batmobile is simple work, but it takes a few minutes to set up, and besides, his team needs to plan out their next move.

The Jersey Devil uses his wrist computer to track Deathstroke’s movements. It doesn’t take long for him to reach the drop point and

join the fray. Batman calls a few short minutes later, letting him know Nightwing is in the Batmobile, ready to head back home. Thankfully, he's already spoken to Agent A and let him know what's going on, so Jersey Devil can take over without any further distraction. Kid Flash keeps watch at the door to make sure he's not interrupted, which also gives their other two teammates a chance to recover from the rough fights they've just scraped through. Thankfully, they aren't badly hurt.

Sitting cross-legged on top of the large desk in the center of the room, Jersey Devil guides the Batmobile back to the Cave, waiting until he receives confirmation from Agent A to breathe out a sigh of relief. Nightwing is safe, for now. He's almost surprised at the worry twisting his insides into knots, but he doesn't let himself dwell on the feeling. Instead, he stretches his legs out and hops off the desk. He displays a map of the building they're in and feels something within him settle back into calm.

"There's one fire put out," he says, breathing easily once more. "Let's take care of the other. Shall we?"

He leads the way out of the room and toward the underground panic room. They run into resistance, but the guards aren't prepared for their weapons not to work on this mystery newcomer. The weapons tailored to his metahuman friends won't work on him, but the men he's taking on don't know that. It gives him an edge—one he exploits to the fullest.

The bunker is heavily protected, but against the full force of the team, the Horsemen's guards fall within a matter of minutes. Jersey Devil starts hacking into the access panel while the others watch his back. Nearly everyone in the building has fallen, but they aren't willing to take chances, especially not when they're this close to the end. Once the locks disengage, Jersey Devil nods to Superboy, who practically rips the heavy, lead-lined door from its hinges.

Warren and Seth Ryder stand flanked by twelve men. Each of them holds onto a different weapon, presumably designed to prey upon their weaknesses. The Jersey Devil spots at least two Kryptonite weapons, and he narrows his eyes. He pauses for a heartbeat, surveying the scene. Finally, he taps his index finger and his pinky of his left hand against his thigh—a signal. The Titans scatter to either side of the doorway as the Jersey Devil leaps into the room. It's a risky move, but it catches his opponents off guard.

He manages to subdue a few men in a flurry of motion, each fluid movement bleeding into the next. The fighting spills out from the bunker, and the Titans join in as their leader focuses on disabling the worst of the weapons—especially the ones using Kryptonite. He sees Superboy struggling to fight with his usual prowess, a pained, grim expression on his face, and the Jersey Devil grows more determined to destroy as many of the Kryptonite weapons as he can. He soon finds himself cornered, split from his team by a wall of five guards. Gritting his teeth against the ache in his tired limbs, he falls back on his last resort.

The bo staff extends with a press of a button, shooting to its full length in an instant. He can see the moment the men understand just who they're dealing with—and the fear following the realization. A sweeping rush of pride goes through him, and *Red Robin* dives back into the fray. With his bo in his hands, the tides turn like a crashing wave against the Horsemen. The five guards are all unconscious before they have a chance to warn their companions.

Seth Ryder is the first to spot him, and he calls out to his brother. The two heads of the Horsemen advance on Red, each one a deadly fighter in his own right. Warren still has a rifle in his white-knuckled grip, and Red spots a mean-looking knife in Seth's hands. He takes on Warren first, making sure he stays out of the knife's reach. They grapple with the rifle for a few moments before he's able to twist it away from Warren and kick it across the room.

Seth manages to swipe at him from behind, and Red dodges on light feet. The momentary distraction gives Warren just enough time to

retrieve a handgun from one of his fallen guards. By the time Red turns back to him, the barrel is aimed at his chest. He doesn't have enough time to fully react before the gun fires. He turns, jerking when the bullet lands in his side. Red lets out a harsh sound, blinded by white-hot pain for a split second.

He's quick to regain his faculties, rolling away from the downward arc of Seth's knife. The movement sears his side, and he bites his lip until it bleeds to stop himself from shouting.

"Funny," Warren says to his brother. "Ain't it, Death?"

"All that effort, hiring mercenaries to kill this little fucker, and all we had to do is wait? He might as well have brought a silver platter with him to serve his ass on, War."

"Sorry boys," Red says, taking on a tone of nonchalance. "My ass is too good for you."

He surges to his feet, catching Warren in the jaw with his bo. In the same instant, the other three Titans reach his side, having taken down the remaining guards and locked the Kryptonite in the lead-lined panic room, away from Superboy. Wonder Girl takes on Seth, disarming him without any trouble, and Superboy knocks out Warren with a single punch. Kid Flash helps steady Red before he can topple over.

The Titans move efficiently, with Superboy taking over keeping their leader upright, so Kid Flash can zip around the room and restrain their unconscious opponents. Red sags against his friend's grip, pained and exhausted. He calls Commissioner Gorden directly, pushing past the agony in his side and focusing on keeping his sentences coherent as he gives him the necessary information. He hangs up and rests his eyes, leaning all his weight against his teammate.

“Dude, you need to stop getting yourself *just* fucked up enough to not get yourself killed.”

“Bite me,” Red replies, words slurring.

“Hey, stay awake, idiot,” Wonder Girl says, voice drifting to him as though he’s underwater. He makes a soft sound of acknowledgement in the back of his throat.

“Left my coffee on the roof,” he says. “When I had to come save your sorry asses.”

“Thank you, oh Fearless Leader,” Wonder Girl says, and Red can vividly picture her rolling her eyes at him. He flips the bird in her general direction, but he can’t hold his arm up for long. His limbs feel weighed down with lead. “C’mon, you need to get out of here. KF, why don’t you and I hang back to handle things with the GCPD, and Superboy can take our favorite idiot genius to get some medical attention?”

“Sounds good to me. Have fun, and don’t die!” Kid Flash says brightly. Red grumbles in response, and a moment later, Superboy picks him up. There’s cold air on his face between one heartbeat and the next, and Red manages to crack an eye open.

Gotham sprawls out underneath them. It’s a beautiful, breathtaking sight, and at any other time, he’d let himself savor it, but instead, he drags his gaze to Kon’s face. Feeling the weight of his stare, Kon glances down and offers him a crooked grin.

“So, are you going to tell me your access code for the Batcave, or will

I have to go in through the front door of the manor?”

Red sighs, but eventually, he gives Kon the code—TR3JRR2D. He *really* doesn’t want to know how Alfred would react to Kon just barging in through the front door, getting blood all over the wood and the carpet. It wouldn’t be pretty. He nearly snickers at the thought, but he decides it would probably hurt too much. Besides, he isn’t sure he has the energy for it.

Red stays conscious long enough to watch the access panel accept his code. As the hidden entrance to the Batcave grants them access, he slumps in Kon’s arms and sinks into the yawning mouth of cold, empty darkness.

A Promise to Try

Chapter Summary

Tim wakes in the medbay, but he's not alone

Thanatos watches him with that eerie gaze, eyes of his mask empty and cold. The knife burns as it marks patterns against his skin, and Red digs his teeth into his lip to stop himself from crying out with it. Everything hurts, and he's exhausted, sick, and in so much pain. His brain feels like it's been dunked underwater and wrung out. His thoughts are blurry, and nothing can break through the haze. His senses can only focus on the pain and the poisonous words Thanatos spits at him.

"Come on, Little Bird, give in. They won't save you. You're either going to die here, in agony, or you'll join me. I can help you show the Bats how mistaken they are about you. You're not one to be discounted or overlooked. You could be a beautiful weapon, Red Robin. Let yourself fall, and I can help you fly again. The Bats have broken your wings; haven't they?"

"Fuck off," Red manages to snarl. He's rewarded with a sharp, stabbing pain in his shoulder, and he can't fight off the gasp torn from him. "I'm not going to join you. I won't turn, so you're going to have to kill me, Thanatos."

"So loyal," he croons. The knife dances across his ribs, a light pressure, a threat. "Why do you keep choosing them? They've never offered you the same courtesy."

"It isn't for the Bats," Red says. He bites back a low groan as Thanatos carves into his upper arm. "I follow my own principles. I fight to help people, and that won't change, no matter whose banner I fly under."

“But you’d still pick them, given the chance.”

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t let it stop me. I won’t let *anything* stop me.”

The knife descends once again. He pays for his defiance in blood.

Tim wakes with a start, still half tangled in his dream. He sits up and struggles to catch his breath, focusing on his own whirling, terrified thoughts before he lets himself take in his surroundings. He’s not locked in that basement, anymore. He remembers Kon taking him to the Cave, so he’s not surprised when he finds himself in the medbay. His hands shake as he rakes them through his hair, trying to ground himself in the present. He’s in the Cave, and he’s safe. Tim takes a few steadying breaths, relishing the feeling of air flowing in and out of his lungs. He looks around, more aware now that he’s shaken off the nightmare. The unconscious figure in the bed to his right confuses him for a moment, until he remembers Dick got injured, too.

He studies his brother’s face, frowning at the ashen color of his normally golden complexion. Dick’s brows are furrowed in pain, and Tim wonders for a moment if he’s about to wake, but he stays unconscious. He hears the doors to the medbay open and turns to see Damian. He’s bundled up in an old sweatshirt of Dick’s, and he’s carrying a thick, fluffy blanket. Alfred the Cat winds his way around Damian’s ankles and hops into Tim’s lap, purring.

“You’re awake,” Damian says, and he offers Tim a stilted, awkward smile. Tim smiles back, a little easier, and Damian’s shoulders relax a little. “How do you feel?”

“Like I got shot,” Tim says with a shrug. “Definitely ranks below the splenectomy.”

“You are the strangest person I have ever met,” Damian says, shaking his head. He sits at Tim’s bedside, drawing the blanket around his shoulders. Tim’s thrown by how tiny Damian looks, sometimes. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Yeah,” Tim says, scratching Alfred the Cat behind his ears. The rumbling purr grows louder, and he smiles. “How’s Dick doing?”

“He’s lucky to be alive, but he’ll be alright,” Damian says. He glances toward their older brother’s prone form, a worried frown twisting his expression. “He took a blow meant for me, and he left himself open to a more dangerous attack, courtesy of my grandfather.” Damian looks back at Tim. “I think he was offended that you weren’t part of the group sent to confront him.”

“That sounds about right,” Tim says with a sigh. Damian’s nose scrunches up at that.

“It’s disconcerting.” At that, Tim snorts, and Damian rolls his eyes. His expression changes again, after a moment, to one more hesitant. “May I ask you something?” He asks, sounding uncertain. Tim nods, encouraging him to continue. “I have upset Grayson, and I would like to rectify that. I’m not sure how I can, though.”

“What could you have possibly done to upset Dick that much? He adores you, Damian.”

“I told him that I cut your line,” Damian admits, shifting uncomfortably. He tucks the blanket closer to himself. “I know it was a personal slight against you, and also, you are still unable to make amends with Grayson, but I was hoping you could help me make things right with him again.” He pauses for a moment, and it’s the most conflicted Tim has ever seen him. “I don’t want him to hate me,” he finally says in a whisper.

“Damian, he could never hate you. He’s probably not all that upset with you for my sake, anyways. I think it’s just what happened to his parents brought back to life, in a way, by his Robin. That probably really unsettled him. Does that make sense?”

“I don’t think that’s completely true,” Damian hedges. He rubs the cuffs of the sleeves on his stolen sweatshirt between his fingers. “He cares for you.”

“I guess,” Tim says. He’s not really convinced. Sure, Dick had said he wants to make things right between them, but Tim still isn’t sure if it’s for his sake or to ease Dick’s own guilt.

“You believe he would not have cared, had I been successful.” Damian says. There’s a challenging glint in his green eyes.

“He would’ve been upset you’d regressed,” Tim says frankly. He’s confused when Damian scowls at him. Tim’s own annoyance spikes. “Oh, come on. Do you really think it matters that *I* was your target? *No one* cared about that, Damian.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Look, I’m sure Dick has long forgiven you for how you behaved back then. He probably just needs a little time. He doesn’t hate you, and he never will, okay?”

Damian’s shoulders slump a little, and he frowns. Tim hesitates for a moment, not sure how to comfort the kid in front of him. He’s still so young, but his newfound peace with Tim is fragile. He doesn’t want to give Damian any reason to go back to hating him. He settles for a patient smile and quiet for Damian to organize his thoughts.

“You’re certain?”

“Of course I am,” Tim says. He glances back over to Dick. A nagging thought swirls in the back of his mind, but he fights to keep it in the shadowy corners of his head. Damian must see something on his face, though.

“Why do you think that about yourself?” He asks. Tim bites his lip and takes a slow breath.

“I’ve never mattered the way others have,” he finally says. “Not to my parents, and definitely not to any of the Bats. Bruce didn’t want me, and Dick…I thought he was the exception, but he made his choice perfectly clear. Jason wanted me dead, and so did you. No one in your family has *ever* wanted me, but I’m useful. Or, at least, I *was.* I don’t really know, anymore.”

“I want you around,” Damian admits. He scoots a little closer to Tim and absently reaches out to bury his fingers in the cat’s fur. Tim moves over to give Damian some more room, and his little brother curls up against his side. “I don’t know whether or not you’re going to forgive Father or Grayson, but I hope you’re still willing to be my brother.”

“Yeah,” Tim says, heart twisting. “Of course I am, Baby Bat.” Quiet settles over the medbay, and eventually, Damian drifts to sleep against his shoulder. Tim looks over to Dick, and he feels tangled threads of emotion as he studies his brother’s face. The quiet feels like a strangling pressure around his throat as he takes in the familiar features. Grief and sorrow mix with a fierce worry for him, and Tim’s head feels like it’s spinning.

Dick has hurt him. That much is indisputable, but whether or not they’ll be able to make amends depends on Tim. Does he even want to open himself back up to that kind of hurt, or should he just cut his losses with the first person to ever care about him? Tim hates not knowing how he feels. It grates against his nerves, making him feel jittery. He’s angry still, but he’s also tired—tired of wanting more from

his supposed family, tired of caring, tired of disappointment. He loves the Bats, and things with Jason have actually been going really well. Damian has reached out now, too, and Tim feels himself slipping into a tentative hope.

He knows the Titans are still furious at the Bats, and they probably won't let go of their grudge for a long time, even if Tim decides to forgive them. He wonders if they could be enough to keep him from pouring too much of himself in the idea of making up with his first family. Sometimes, he still feels like that lonely little kid Janet and Jack Drake left behind in that cold, empty mansion—always trying to be good enough to make them *stay*. He feels caught between wanting to forgive and not wanting to give the Bats the opportunity to hurt him again. Tim casts another frustrated glance in Dick's direction.

Then, Dick's eyes flutter open.

He groans, struggling to sit up and wincing with the movement. His upper torso is swathed in bandages, and Tim can only imagine the extent of the damage. Dick's eyes lock onto Tim's, and Tim feels like a bug caught under a magnifying glass. They stare at each other for a moment, suspended in silence.

"You okay?" Dick finally asks. His voice is low and raspy, and he cringes at the sound. "What happened?"

"Got shot," Tim explains. "I'm fine. How are you?"

"Best not to ask," Dick says with a low chuckle. "Ra's sends his regards, by the way."

"Asshole," Tim grumbles. Dick nods in agreement. "Seriously though, are you alright?" As upset as he is with his brother, he hates seeing

him hurt like this.

“Give me a few days, and I will be. Sheesh, Ra’s packs a *really* nasty punch. How did you fight that guy on your own and survive, again?”

“Beats me,” Tim replies. “I surprised myself with that one, honestly.”

“Wait,” Dick says, expression shifting. His eyebrows furrow, and his mouth flattens into a thin line. “You weren’t planning on making out of that fight?”

“Not really, no.” Tim raises a brow at Dick. “How could I? Ra’s is centuries older than me, and I was fighting him one-on-one. I was biding time, not fighting to win. Besides, it didn’t matter what the outcome of the fight was. I did what I needed to do and ensured everyone Bruce loved was safe, so protecting his legacy with WE was just the last piece of the puzzle.”

“You weren’t safe, Timmy. And…” He trails off, voice small. “I thought you knew I’d be there to catch you.” Tim shakes his head, and Dick’s expression crumbles. “Oh, God.”

A heavy silence settles over the room, like a thick cloud weighed down with rain waiting to fall. It breaks with a shuddering sob from Dick. He rolls to his side, curling in on himself as he cries. Tim’s eyes go wide, stunned. He hadn’t meant to upset him like this. Dick’s entire frame shakes with each breath, and tears streak freely down his cheeks. Dick puts a hand to his mouth to muffle the sound—probably trying not to wake Damian. Tim’s heart sinks to his stomach as he watches his brother’s grief spill over.

The bandages covering Dick’s chest start to redden, and Tim curses. He gets to his feet, and Damian slumps against his pillow, still asleep,

somehow. The poor kid must've been exhausted from the fight. Tim stumbles, having forgotten to disentangle himself from the medical monitoring equipment he's hooked up to, but he frees himself quickly. Tim moves to Dick's side and rolls him gently onto his back, trying not to flinch as Dick lets out a broken, pained sound. He cuts away the bandages and swears again at the bloodied sight.

"You tore your stitches," he says. "Try to calm down as much as you can, and I'll stitch you back up, okay?"

"Calm down?" Dick asks, voice breaking. "After what I just realized? How do you expect me to just accept that my little brother would've let himself—-" He blinks back more tears. *"Fuck, fuck!"*

"Breathe," Tim soothes, working quickly to prep the medical equipment. "You know calming techniques, Dick. Use them."

Dick manages to get his breathing under control and settles back, like the energy has been sapped out of him. He reminds Tim of a puppet with cut strings with the way he goes limp. Tim gets to work, neatly fixing the stitches Dick pulled. Once he has his torso bandaged back up, he sits heavily on the bed and hangs his head. He's exhausted, too, and his side is killing him. Dick's hand scrabbles for his, and Tim lets him anchor himself by clinging to his fingers.

"Why?" Dick asks, after a long silence. The single word hangs in the air, a suffocating weight against Tim's chest.

"I wasn't one of the ones who mattered," Tim says simply. Dick's grip on his hand tightens.

"Every time I think I'm starting to understand just how badly I fucked things up with you, I find out something worse." Dick scrubs his free

hand across his salt-streaked face. “I don’t think I can ever make it up to you, and I *hate* that. I messed up, and my mistakes practically cost you everything, and I can’t even begin to say how sorry I am. It’s not enough. I know it isn’t, but I can’t say much more than that right now. Anything else is just meaningless.”

“Words are futile devices,” Tim says, a sad smile gracing his face.

“I’m going to be making up for this my whole life, Tim,” Dick says. His eyes move over Tim’s face, a bit desperately. Tim isn’t sure what he’s looking for. “I thought I was putting us on equal footing, but I hurt you. And I just kept making it worse. I’m afraid I won’t ever be able to get us to a point where you can look at me without feeling those hurts all over again.”

Tim doesn’t know how to respond to him. He thinks back to his own musings and feels torn. The look in his brother’s eyes is unsettling. Dick Grayson isn’t supposed to look so sad, so defeated. He isn’t sure he and Dick can get to that point, either, but he might be willing to try. He’ll have to ask the Titans to keep him in check, though. He has a tendency to give everything of himself, only to be left with nothing, again and again, but he knows his friends won’t let him sacrifice so much. He dreads that conversation only a little less than the one he’s currently having.

“You know as well as I do that things aren’t going to be the same, right?” Tim asks slowly. Dick nods miserably. “And I’m not just going to pretend like nothing happened?” Another nod. Tim hesitates, chewing on his next words. “Do you think I could be family, Dick?”

“You already are,” Dick says softly. “Always have been, from the minute you waltzed into my apartment and demanded I go back to being Robin.”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Dick,” Tim says. “It won’t be easy regaining my trust in you.”

“That’s on me to fix—not you. I was the one who broke your trust, so I’ll do what I can to earn it back. If that’s not possible, I’ll just have to be content with whatever you’re willing to give.”

“Why not just let it go, then?” Tim asks, caught between genuine curiosity and his own need to test Dick for the answer he wants. “Why not just leave it at an apology and let things fall where they will?”

“Because I’m selfish,” Dick says. “I want my brother back in my life—the awesome, dorky, genius brother I was stupid enough to let walk away.”

Tim closes his eyes, feeling the heavy weight of Dick’s hand in his own. He wants his brother back, too, but he’s not sure he’s going to be able to forgive him. He doesn’t think fostering a working relationship first will work, like it has with Jason. It’s what he’s planning with Damian, but this is different. Dick and Tim were brothers before Bruce got lost in time. He isn’t sure what they are, now.

Dick took Robin from him and gave it to the kid who wanted him dead. He didn’t listen when Tim told him Bruce was alive. Dick tried to have Tim committed to Arkham. He hadn’t argued when Damian told him he wasn’t welcome in his own home, and he’d watched as Tim’s life burnt to the ground and left him to pick up the pieces alone.

But Dick was his brother, once. He offered a listening ear when Tim had issues with Bruce or questions about girls. They ordered pizzas with the craziest topping combinations they could think of and binge-watched crappy movies until sunrise. Dick taught him how to train-surf, how to have *fun* as Robin. Dick had seen the lonely kid underneath the mask and reached out to him, made him feel like he

finally, *finally* had someone to rely on.

"After Thanatos has been dealt with," Tim says, voice halting and stumbling over his words. "I think we could maybe try to work things out. I'm not saying I forgive you, because honestly? I don't. Not yet, at least, but I want to. I'm willing to try."

Dick's face floods with so much hope, it seems almost blinding. He squeezes Tim's fingers again, smiling slightly. His eyes are brighter now, determined, but he still looks uncertain, in a way. He looks like he wants to reach out, but he's holding himself back. Tim hesitates for a moment before he opens his arms. Dick grabs him in a hug, holding onto him fiercely, like Tim would slip away like smoke if he let go. It's reassurance for them both.

"I love you so much, little brother," Dick murmurs against Tim's hair. "I promise I'll never let you doubt it ever again."

Protocol: Papa Tango

Chapter Summary

The Titans are fierce when it comes to Tim

When Tim wakes up, his cheek is pressed against Dick's shoulder. He's still wrapped up in his brother's hug, and Dick is still asleep next to him. Tim sighs and carefully extricates himself from Dick's hold, trying not to wake him. He manages to free himself after a bit of struggling and stands. There isn't anyone else in the medbay with them, so Tim decides to wander upstairs to get himself a cup of coffee.

Tim stumbles up to the manor, yawning sleepily as he goes. He makes his way into the kitchen, where Alfred and the Titans are already waiting. Tim's friends all light up at the sight of him, and Alfred offers him a warm smile. Tim isn't capable of coherent thought, just yet, so he grumbles a greeting and sits down next to Kon at the little breakfast nook.

The weak wintery sunlight filters through the curtains and spills across the table. Tim lays his head against Kon's shoulder, dozing off until he hears the soft sound of a ceramic mug being set down against the wood. Without opening his eyes, he reaches for the mug and takes a long swig of hot coffee. He mumbles his thanks to Alfred and opens his eyes. Cassie and Bart sit across from him, smiling in amusement. They're far too used to his early-morning attitude by now to be surprised.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," Cassie says brightly. "How are you feeling?"

"Ask me after my second cup," Tim grumbles. Bart snickers. His eyes are bright, and Tim thinks he's far more awake than anyone has any business being. Tim sticks his tongue out at him, and Bart laughs

harder.

Alfred sets down plates for each of them—a veritable mountain of food for Kon and Bart. Tim himself has a few of his favorite blueberry scones and a small bowl of raspberries. Another cup of coffee gets placed in front of him, and Tim casts a grateful look at the old butler. He normally doesn't eat breakfast, but he's thankful for Alfred's food, as always.

They eat, but Kon must pick up on something bothering Tim, because he elbows him in the ribs after a few minutes of quiet. He raises a dark brow, and Tim sighs, running a hand through his messy hair.

"I need you guys to keep me in check," he starts slowly. That snags the attention of his friends. Cassie props her elbows on the table, leaning in, and Bart stops completely, fork halfway raised to his mouth. "I might have promised Dick I'd let him try to work things out with us."

"Tim, no," Bart whines. "That's such a bad idea, dude."

"I know," he says, sighing. He rests his chin against his palm. "I want to forgive him, though, and I think I can give him another chance. I just don't think I can survive him cutting me loose again, if I rely on him too much. So, I'm asking you guys to make sure I won't let that happen."

"You're asking us to keep you from putting too much trust in Dick?" Cassie asks. "You already have the biggest trust issues of anyone I know, Tim."

"It's different with him," Tim says softly. "For the longest time, I thought he was the first person to ever actually care about me, but

then everything happened, and nothing made sense anymore. I was so *sure* it was all a lie. I'm starting to think it might have been genuine, after all. I don't want to be wrong."

"You're sure about this?" Kon asks, a worried frown curling at his mouth.

"Not really," Tim admits. His hands shake a little, and he bites his lip. "Those first few weeks on my own nearly killed me. I was chasing ghosts, and I nearly joined them. I can't go through that again."

"You won't," Cassie says gently. There's guilt in her voice, dripping heavily from each word like honey. "We've got you, Tim." She reaches out and rests a hand against his forearm, smiling sadly. Tim squeezes her hand. He forgave her a long time ago.

"You know how we feel about the Bats," Kon says. "Personally, I don't think they're good for you, and you'd be better off cutting your losses. I know you still care about them, though, so it makes sense you'd want to give them a chance to show you they care, too. We've got your back, no matter what you decide, but if that asshole does *anything* to hurt you like that again, I'll tear his arms off."

"That won't be necessary. Just keep me from letting it get to me, if it doesn't work out?"

His friends nod and agree—begrudgingly—to help him, and after that, breakfast is quiet but somehow peaceful, that is, until Bruce walks in.

The room goes silent. Cassie and Bart exchange a look and immediately move from across the table to the bench next to Tim, pressing close. Squished between Cassie and Kon, Tim barely has enough room to move his arms to drink his coffee. Bruce looks

uncomfortable, but he takes the available spot across from the Titans. There's an awkward pause.

"Alfred, would you please make me a cup of coffee?" Bruce finally asks, sounding resigned.

"Of course, Master Bruce."

"Mr. Pennyworth, would you please put salt in his coffee, instead of sugar?" Cassie asks, voice syrupy sweet.

"Master Bruce takes his coffee black, Miss Cassie," Alfred says. His tone is completely neutral, and Cassie sighs, pouting. She leans her head against Tim's shoulder, and he can smell the strawberry of her shampoo mingling with the scent of ozone, which always seems to cling to her skin. Bart snags a berry from Tim's plate and pops it in his mouth.

"So, are the rumors that you're a vampire true?" He asks, chewing obnoxiously. "Because, like, you're nocturnal; you turn into a bat, and you suck." Kon snorts, and Cassie leans her face against Tim's arm to muffle her laughter. Bruce just sighs and passes a hand over his face.

"I'm not going to dignify that with a response," he says.

"Technically, that was a response," Bart counters. His expression is alight with mischief, and he winks at Tim when their eyes meet. "Also, I didn't hear a denial."

"Guys, can we maybe put a pause on Protocol: Alpha Beta until breakfast is over?" Tim asks. His friends all exchange looks and finally nod at him.

“We make no promises over Protocol: Papa Tango, though,” Kon says. Tim swats at him without looking up, and Kon laughs, completely unashamed, even when Tim manages to smack his jaw.

Protocol: Papa Tango is the broadest of the Titans’ many, many Tim-related protocols. Naturally, it stands for ‘Protect Tim,’ but the team manages to use it to embarrass him, most of the time. His friends are obnoxious. Sometimes, he wonders why he puts up with them.

“So,” Bruce says, taking a sip of the coffee Alfred prepared for him. His eyes are unwavering as they rest on Tim’s face. His brow furrows when he takes in the exhausted lines etched into the pale, thin features. “Things seem to be improving between you and your brothers.” Tim nods, uncertain what Bruce is getting at. “I’m glad,” he says. There’s a warmth in his tone Tim hasn’t heard directed toward him in a very long time. He doesn’t know how to respond.

The silence settling over the room is stifling, and Tim feels Kon’s fingers wrap around his wrist. Tim uses the fingers of his free hand to tap twice against Kon’s knuckles, and he offers him a smile. He appreciates the quiet comfort. Cassie sits up and drapes her arm over Tim’s shoulders, fingers curling in his hair. Bruce flounders for a moment, but he recovers quickly.

“I had a talk with Jason,” he says, and Tim sees the tightness around his eyes and at the corners of his mouth as he speaks. He guesses that conversation didn’t go very well. “I’ve come to understand I haven’t been treating you fairly.”

“No shit,” Kon says, his voice practically a growl. His expression is coldly furious.

“What did Jay do? Beat you over the head with the truth?” Tim asks smoothly. He takes another sip of his own coffee, gaze just as cold as Kon’s but lacking the emotion. He’s a blank slate, completely unreadable, even to Bruce’s trained eye. “It isn’t difficult to see, Bruce, to those who aren’t willfully ignorant.”

“Perhaps this isn’t the time for this conversation,” Bruce says. Tim spots the wary eye he casts over the Titans and scowls. Gritting his teeth, Tim signals for his team to give them some privacy. They hesitate for a long moment but finally acquiesce. Alfred refills both of their coffee mugs and takes his leave, also. Tim and Bruce sit across from one another in the heavy quiet.

“I don’t understand why you won’t come home, Tim,” Bruce finally says. “I thought you knew how valued you are.” He hangs his head, staring into the depths of his steaming mug. “I never meant to alienate you.” He smiles, but it’s strained. “Batman needs his Robin, after all.”

“I’m not your Robin anymore,” Tim says quietly. He pauses for a moment, fighting against the words hammering against his ribcage, begging for freedom. “Batman needs a Robin to balance him out. Light to the dark.” He traces the rim of his mug with a fingertip, avoiding Bruce’s gaze. “But *Bruce* is supposed to keep his kids balanced. That’s a father’s job, right?” He looks up, eyes weighted down with something shattered. “I was only ever Robin, not your son. I was stupid to think otherwise.”

“No, that’s not—”

“What? True?” Tim asks. He sounds weary, even to his own ears. “B, you sent me back to that cold, empty house over and over and *over* again. You stopped caring as soon as the mask was off, and that was fine. Once you took me in after my dad died, I thought it was different, but I was wrong. It’s my mistake to deal with.”

“You’re my son,” Bruce says, tone resolute. “You are my *son,* Tim, and I won’t let you go on thinking otherwise.” Tim frowns. Part of him feels like a thunderstorm, raging and screaming inside his head, but he focuses on the still waters of thought. He presents a placid front, dissipating the storm clouds.

“You want to understand?” He asks, voice soft, practically threatening. Bruce nods, and Tim closes his eyes. “After my dad died, I kind of became obsessed with this idea of last words, but not—not final words, the last words shared between two people before one of them dies.” His lips twist. It’s a morbid fascination, but he’s never been one to shy away from the shadows. “I died, Bruce, and do you remember what your last words to me were?”

“No.”

“You said, *‘Red Robin, I expected better from you.’”* Tim opens his eyes and fixes his pale, unnerving gaze on Bruce’s stricken face. “That was it. That would’ve been the very last thing you’d ever said to me, had Jason not been able to revive me.”

“I shouldn’t have been so hard on you,” Bruce says. A muscle in his jaw twitches, and he looks unsettled. “I’ve been nothing but critical with you, Tim. From your start as Robin, to the business with Captain Boomerang, right to the...end. Even when you made all the right choices, I was unnecessarily harsh.”

“I’m not going to argue with you, there,” Tim says with a shrug.

“I see more of myself in you than I do any of my other children, and it scares me, Tim. You’re brilliant, but you throw yourself into the mission with no care or concern for yourself. I never meant to pass that recklessness along to any of you boys.”

“I wasn’t your kid,” Tim reminds him coolly. His eyes are still steely, like moonlight against a frozen lake. “My job wasn’t to be a son to you. I was there to keep you from killing yourself or someone else. I was raised by the Bat, not the man, and you’re surprised I turned out like this? I’m cold and calculating, and sometimes I can be cruel. I wasn’t always this way, Bruce.”

“You had parents,” Bruce argues. Tim lets out a broken little laugh and shakes his head.

“Yeah, they did a great job parenting me from halfway across the world,” he says, spitting the words like bitter venom. “You have to face yourself sometime, Bruce. Are you my parent or not? Am I your son, or do I cease to exist outside the mask? You’re arguing for both, but I need a better answer.”

“Tim, I care about you. I never wanted another son after Jason died, but I got one anyways. You’re tenacious, too stubborn for your own good, and you made me see just how great a kid you are, even when I didn’t want to.”

“But I never measured up.” Tim says, raising a brow. “My decisions were regarded as more dangerous than Jason’s and Damian’s deadliest mistakes.”

“I failed you.”

“You have to try in order to fail,” Tim says. He stands and moves to the door, refusing to look back. “Look, I’m not saying I don’t want anything to do with you, Bruce, but I need you to figure out for yourself why I can’t just sit there and let you call me your son. Maybe then, we can talk.”

Tim walks into the hall and comes face-to-face with his worried teammates. He practically falls against Kon, exhausted from the conversation with Bruce. The Titans surround him, and he can hear Cassie murmuring softly—something soothing. He doesn't focus on the words but lets them wash over him.

"At least Dick knew what he was apologizing for," Tim mutters. He hums thoughtfully as he feels a hand start to card through his hair. "I wonder what Jason said to him to make him even attempt to smooth things over."

"Probably something very loud, with a lot of cussing," Bart offers.

Tim laughs and pulls back. Three sets of eyes watch him carefully, studying his expression with intense focus. He offers his friends a tired smile and waves for them to follow him. He leads them through the manor to one of his favorite rooms: a tiny sitting room, tucked away in one of the lesser-used halls. It's cozy, and no one bothers him there. He pushes away the question of whether or not anyone has ever looked and flicks on the light.

One of Tim's laptops sits on the low coffee table, next to a heavy book written entirely in Norwegian. Bart picks up the book and flicks through a few pages, nose wrinkling as he tries to read the text. Tim moves to the couch, snagging one of the blankets draped over the back and wrapping it around his shoulders. He plucks the book from Bart's hands and opens it in his lap. The Titans take the hint and settle in, falling into an easy, comfortable quiet.

It takes a while, but eventually, Tim feels like talking. He marks his page and closes the book, and Kon turns to look at him. He sets his phone down and nudges Bart—sprawled out, asleep on the carpet—with his foot. By the time Bart sits up, Tim already has Cassie's attention, too.

“I hate this,” Tim says. The venom he’d used when he spoke with Bruce is gone, and all that’s left in his tone is resignation. “I hate not knowing where I stand anymore. I thought I knew, but it feels like my head is all screwed up. God,” he mutters, burying his face in his hands. “Did Thanatos really fuck me up that badly? Am I just a useless, broken bird for the Bats to pity?”

“If that’s what they see when they look at you, they aren’t seeing *you,”* Cassie says. “You’re stronger than that, Tim.”

“Right,” Tim says with a sigh. “I’ve been broken before and put myself back together without their help. What’s different this time?”

“They’re not the cause, this time,” Kon says.

Tim takes a shuddering breath, closing his eyes. He knows Kon isn’t being entirely fair to the Bats, but he doesn’t argue. Losing Bruce in time, only to lose him *again* to the Captain Boomerang incident, losing Robin, his brother, and his home in one fell swoop, losing Kon and Bart—the weight of it all had shattered him. He remade himself from the broken pieces, smoothing out the rough edges as best he could, but he’s different now than he was. He can’t go back.

Tim is something darker now, something more dangerous than the Robin who got kicked out of the nest *ever* was. He’s the product of having nothing left to lose for too long, and the scars of that time still linger, both on his skin and in his mind. Bruce said it himself; Tim is reckless with himself, and he knows it. Red Robin burned into existence as a solitary creature—without anyone at his back to catch him when he fell—and let himself be twisted by his own ruthless determination. It’s how he’s survived this long, and not even the Titans have been able to draw him back across that line. He knows it terrifies them.

Sometimes, Tim's terrified of himself, too. He feels it creeping up over him, trailing ice through his blood, and he takes another shaky breath. He offers his friends a smile, however weak it might be. The storm in his head quiets a little at the sight of his friends' faces, warm and reassuring. He feels a rush of affection and gratefulness strong enough to knock the breath out of him.

"This time, I've got you guys," he says. His voice is thick and wobbly, but his tone is confident. "That's enough for me to know I'll be okay."

Birdsong to Battle Cry

Chapter Summary

Red Robin, Red Hood, and Deathstroke take on Thanatos

Chapter Notes

I finally have a tentative chapter count, which might be subject to change. You can expect 25 chapters, at the very least. I hope you enjoy!

“How much do ya trust me?”

Tim looks up from his phone and fixes a flat look onto the planes of his face. Jason grins down at him, hands on his hips, smiling like the Devil himself. There’s a wicked glint in his eyes which spells trouble. He’s already got some sort of idea in his head, no doubt, and he wants to drag Tim into his nonsense. He’s dressed in his uniform, minus the helmet, which is tucked under one arm.

“That is a *very* loaded question, Jason,” Tim says slowly. He’s only been back in his apartment for half a day, and already his peace and quiet is being interrupted. Tim wishes he could sink back into his couch and let it swallow him whole. He sets the phone down and sits up fully, kicking the blanket off his legs.

“I’ve got a potential lead,” Jason says. “But I can’t have ya rattin’ me out to the Bat.”

“Right,” Tim says with a snort. “Because Bruce and I are in such a great spot, right now. What do you need me to do?” Jason actually lights up a little, like he wasn’t expecting Tim to choose him over Bruce. It makes him sad, but he understands.

“Just keep an open mind.” Tim rolls his eyes but agrees, as long as Jason makes him a cup of coffee. Jason laughs, loud and carefree, and Tim feels a smile tug at his mouth. It’s Jason’s laugh—not the Red Hood’s. There isn’t a trace of sardonic amusement, and it reminds him of Robin so strongly, it sends an ache through him.

Jason goes to Tim’s kitchen and makes him a cup of coffee, as promised. He fills a mug for himself too, and settles next to his brother on the couch. He drapes an arm over the back and kicks his feet up on the table, leaning back with a content sigh.

“Where are the mother hens?” Jason asks. Tim raises a brow at him, and Jason snorts. A moment passes while Tim marvels at the situation. Jason seems so at ease, and before now, he never would’ve imagined the Robin he idolized growing up—the Robin who tried his hardest to kill Tim—could be this content around him.

“The Titans went out for dinner. Cass is taking a nap in one of the guest rooms, but otherwise, it’s just us for now.” Tim takes a sip of his coffee, sighing happily. “What did you say to Bruce, anyways? He tried to stumble through an apology without knowing what for.”

“Yelled at him a whole fuckin’ lot,” Jason says with a crooked smile. Tim laughs, but something still nags at him. He wonders why Jason bothered. Before he can ask, Jason elaborates. “I mean, he’s not been fair, yeah? He should treat all his kids the same, but he’s been usin’ double standards.”

“I’m not one of his kids,” Tim says quietly. Jason scoffs, shaking his head, and Tim frowns. “I’m not. I’ve only ever been a means to an end or a problem to take care of.” He spots the pitying look on Jason’s face, and he offers a sad smile. “It’s fine.”

“No,” Jason argues. “It really isn’t. Ya deserve better, kid. I know I’m

not the person to tell ya that, but it's true. B deserves a smackdown with how much of an ass he's bein', anyways."

"You're always the first to tell him when he happens to be acting like an asshole."

"Which is why it's all I ever do when I talk to him." He and Tim exchange a glance and crack up. Jason stands and stretches, downing the rest of his coffee in one swig. He reaches for his helmet, which he'd tossed down next to him on the couch. "Suit up, Baby Bird," he says brightly. "Places to be."

Tim and Jason descend into the operations center, and a few minutes later, Red Robin and Red Hood are driving out into the dusky twilight, toward Hood's usual territory. They park their motorcycles in one of Hood's secure garages and head off on foot. They're in the heart of Crime Alley, and Red follows Hood down narrow, cracked sidewalks and through dimly lit alleyways. The path they take is winding, and Red is acutely aware of Hood's careful avoidance of the few working security cameras in the area.

Hood leads them to and enters an old factory building, and Red can see a handful of men—some standing guard, some speaking in excited, loud tones, some barking orders to others. The room goes quiet at their arrival, with several greetings to Hood, which he returns. He's careful not to get pulled into any lengthy conversations, or maybe the men can sense something of his urgency. Maybe Red's presence is unnerving them—the smaller, spookier Bat trailing behind like a shadow. One man waits at the door to an office, tapping his foot anxiously. Hood unlocks the door and waves him in, with Red trailing after them both.

"Hey Hood, how ya been?" The guy is stocky, with a crooked nose, and his skin is marked by freckles and scars. He has a mop of red curls and a wide, easy smile.

“Cormac,” Hood greets with a nod. He leans against the desk and folds his arms. Cormac stands in front of him, and Red moves to the adjacent wall, keeping eyes on both men. “Been busy. How’s the wife?”

“Real good,” Cormac says, grinning. “She’s expecting—due in June.”

“Congratulations. Lemme know if ya need any time off, and give her my best.” Cormac nods, and Hood straightens. “Alright, now tell me and the kid whatcha wanted to talk about earlier.” Cormac turns to Red Robin, offering him that wide smile, and Red nods in response.

“It was a surprise when the boss first told us to back offa ya,” Cormac says, laughing a little. “But I’m glad he did. Ya seem like a good kid. Saved my Marie from a mugger a few months back, so ya have our thanks, Little Red.”

Red hadn’t known Hood told his men to leave him alone, but it’s a pleasant surprise. He offers Cormac a polite smile but stays quiet, not sure how to respond. As it is, the silence is giving him too much time to think. He’d realized what this old factory is as soon as they’d walked in, but it’s still hard to wrap his head around it all. He can’t believe Hood just brought him to his base of operations. It’s a show of trust he’s not sure what to do with.

That the Red Hood can maintain his footing as a powerful crime lord while simultaneously working with the Bats is impressive. Red would be more surprised if it was anyone but Jason. He’s always been dangerous, but his sharp instincts and intellect make him a heavy presence among Gotham’s criminal elite. His enemies tend to underestimate him as all brawn, but he’s far more intelligent than he lets people believe.

Cormac shifts nervously, tugging at the sleeves of his worn-out flannel

shirt. He offers an awkward smile to them and takes a breath, fingers tapping against his thigh. He's brimming with a fluttery sort of energy which sets Red's teeth on edge just by looking at him. Hood seems similarly unenthused. His hands twitch, the way they always do when he's craving a smoke. Finally, Cormac speaks, and Red understands his nerves. It's not good news.

"Some guy was scoutin' around, lookin' for some muscle. He approached me early this mornin' and tried to get me to help him track down Little Red, here."

"What did he look like?" Red asks, immediately on edge.

"Average," Cormac says. "Brown hair, crooked nose. Had a wicked scar down one arm, though." Red and Hood exchange a glance, both recognizing the description as that of Dorian Hawthorne.

"Fuck," Hood grumbles. He draws a knife from his boot and stabs it into the desk, frustration bleeding from him. Cormac quietly excuses himself, leaving Red and Hood in the office. "This isn't good, Baby Bird. None of my guys will join up with Hawthorne, if they know what's good for 'em, but there's always someone out there willin' to work as hired muscle."

"He's building up a crew to take me down." Red sighs. "This complicates matters, but I don't think it'll change our plans much. Hopefully." He leans his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. His shoulders slump a little, weighed down by his heavy thoughts. "I'll give Deathstroke a call to warn him, but I still think we should make our move later tonight."

"We have no clue how many guys he's got at his back. You sure that's a good idea—goin' in blind?"

“Not blind, necessarily,” Red hedges. “But hey, I’ve got the Red Hood and Deathstroke the Terminator at my back. I think I’ve got the edge here.” He pushes off from his spot at the wall and crosses the room, heading for the door. “I’ll do extra recon, just to cover our bases. Meet me at the rendezvous point in an hour?”

Hood nods, but Red has the feeling he’s frowning, underneath the helmet. He doesn’t hang around long enough to find out. As he’s moving back to the garage to pick up his bike, Red calls his cousin to give him the update on their situation. Slade sounds pissed, but he agrees to meet at the arranged time. Red gets back to the Ducati and starts it up, tearing out of the garage.

He crosses Gotham, heading for Tricorner Yards, where he’d identified Thanatos’ base. Red breathes in the salty air, trying to calm his nerves. He’s the vigilante right now, not the terrified teenager. He’ll take Thanatos down, disappear somewhere, and *then* let himself finally freak out. For now, he’s got a job to do.

He parks the motorcycle and covers the last few blocks on foot. Red Robin dissolves into the shadows, and by the time he’s situated across the street from the crumbling building Thanatos is holed up in, he feels more like mist than flesh and blood. He takes note of each person going in and out of the old, dilapidated processing plant, nestled close to the harbor. It still reeks of fish.

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The rendezvous point is an old bait and tackle shop, and by the time Red creeps in through one of the broken windows, Hood and Deathstroke are already waiting for him. They exchange casual greetings and settle in for business. The presence of the extra men under the thumb of Thanatos is discussed at length, but ultimately, only one aspect of the plan changes. Originally, Deathstroke was

meant to stay back, sniping from long-distance and coming into the fight only if needed, but the group decides he'll join them immediately. With the combined brutal force of Deathstroke and the Red Hood, they're confident they can clear the path to Thanatos without trouble.

They split up, each moving to a different entry point. Hood and Deathstroke take the front and back entrances on the ground floor, and Red Robin makes his way to the second story and opens a window. Red keeps an eye on both members of his team, waiting to give them the signal. He spots Thanatos, decked out in full uniform, emerging from one of the offices at the far wall. He's deep in conversation with one of his men, completely distracted.

Now.

Red slips into the building and tosses the smoke bombs, filling the bottom floor with a heavy layer of cover. Hood and Deathstroke burst in at the first signs of smoke curling from the unsealed edges of the doors. Red stays on the catwalk above, scanning the smoke for signs of Thanatos. He'll almost certainly retreat to the basement underground.

He can see flashes of gunfire as Hood and Deathstroke circle the edge of the room, moving in tandem from adjacent walls. The smoke starts to clear, and Red leaps down into the thick of the fighting once his team stops firing. He sees Deathstroke draw his katana, and Hood gets drawn into a brawl, fighting with his fists. Red draws his bo staff and takes down two guys with one swing. He lets Hood and Deathstroke cover him as he heads for the door to the basement, taking on a few henchmen when his team can't stop them first.

Hood meets him at the door, while Deathstroke is still engaging with the dozens of men still standing. Red isn't worried, but he still waits for Deathstroke to signal for them to move on. Hood kicks the door open, and the two of them descend into the dark. The stairs are old, the type to creak under their weight, but the two of them were trained

by the Bat. They know how to move silently.

The stairs lead to a network of stone tunnels. Red curses under his breath when he spots the winding branches of passages. The building's plans are apparently out of date. He was expecting a simple, unfinished basement, not *this*. He and Hood exchange a glance and a nod. Red takes the tunnel on the left, and Hood makes his way to the one on the right. He hates to split up, but they've still got their comms, so they should be fine.

Red sends an update to Deathstroke, along with instructions to take the middle passage once he's done upstairs. Once he gets confirmation from his cousin, Red starts to move. He keeps track of every turn he takes and every dead end he runs into. He's in a twisting labyrinth, alone and aimless—like a rat in a maze. He has to backtrack often, but he doesn't run into anyone as he winds his way through the tunnels.

Red exchanges status updates with his two teammates. Deathstroke has just made his way to the basement, and Hood is running into the same problem as he is. The tunnels span a vast area, and they seem to be designed to be confusing. Red wonders what their purpose is, but that's not his problem, for now. He just needs to find Thanatos and end this nightmare. Red passes the mouth of another tunnel and readies himself to keep running, but he's tossed to the ground before he can take another step.

A trip wire tangles around his ankles as he hits the uneven floor of the tunnel. The earth rumbles beneath him, and heat sears his back as he's thrown forward. An explosion rocks the cave system, collapsing the entrance directly behind him. Debris falls, blocking his way back, and Red curses, covering his head with his arms. One jagged rock lands on his leg, pinning it to the ground and cutting into his skin.

"What the fuck was that?" Hood's voice barks over the comms. He sounds freaked out, and Red can't blame him.

“Explosion,” Red replies through gritted teeth. “Collapsed part of the tunnel I’m in. I’m trapped.”

“I’ve got a lock on your coordinates, Red,” Hood says, voice growling with fury and thinly veiled fear. “How stuck are you?”

“The way ahead is clear, but I’m pinned. I should be able to dig myself out pretty quickly. The way back is completely blocked, though.”

“Shit,” Hood grumbles. “I’ve got grunts swarmin’ around me like fuckin’ flies. Where did they come from?”

“I’m surrounded, too,” Deathstroke says. “Shouldn’t take me long to fight my way out, but it’ll take a while to dig you out, kid.”

“Be careful,” Red warns. His nerves are on fire, and he has to take a few moments to gather his thoughts. The air is gritty with soot and crumbled rock. “I’ll get myself out from under the rubble and see what’s ahead. There might be another way out.”

“This stinks of a trap, Baby Bird,” Hood says. Red hears gunfire on one of the comm lines. Hood curses profusely. “Fuck, how many of these assholes *are there?”*

Red starts to push against the rock pinning him, biting his lip to keep himself from shouting. After a few minutes of struggle, he’s able to push it off of him. He lays there for a moment, breathing hard. His leg is bleeding sluggishly, but he doesn’t think anything’s broken. Small mercies. He stands unsteadily and leans against the rough wall.

“All good, kid?” Deathstroke asks. Red gives the affirmative, and the comms go quiet, except for the sounds of combat drifting through.

Red tightens his hold on his bo and makes his way down the tunnel. There aren’t any more turns or nasty surprises for as far as he can see in the shadowy gloom, but something feels off. A sense of dread creeps through him, crawling through his veins like the whispery touch of a spider. He sees a light in the distance, and the feeling only grows stronger.

The tunnel opens into a wide cavern, a dead end. Waiting at the far wall, Thanatos sits, polishing one of his knives with the casual air of a man with all the time in the world at his disposal. He doesn’t look up when Red enters the chamber, but he definitely knows he’s no longer alone. A heavy pause weighs down the air, making it hard to breathe.

“Hello, Little Bird,” Thanatos says, still focused on the blade in his hands. Dimly, Red is aware of both Hood and Deathstroke shouting at him over the comms, but his brain won’t let him hear anything but the cadence of Thanatos’ silken words. “We have unfinished business.”

“It ends here,” Red replies, voice steady. Thanatos looks up, then, and Red feels his eyes on him. The gaze makes his skin itch. He doesn’t let his discomfort show, remaining stoic and cold. “You’re *done,* Thanatos.”

“Ah,” Thanatos says. “It was quite impressive how you and your allies managed to coordinate an attack on Mavka, the League of Assassins, and the Two Horsemen. I’m afraid I won’t bow to defeat so easily, though.”

Red’s heart leaps in his chest, twisting and tumbling toward his feet. He takes a measured breath and lets the fear slip away as he exhales. He needs to keep his head level—keep the gnawing anxiety at bay.

He's trapped with Thanatos in this cavern, but his team is fighting to get to him. He's on his own for now, but he isn't *alone* this time.

A moment passes. Two.

Thanatos' loud laughter echoes off the cave walls, bouncing back toward them. It's an eerie, grating sound, and it claws against Red's ears. He stalks forward, knife in hand, and even though Red's breath catches in his throat, he keeps calm. Thanatos doesn't make a move to attack, though. He prowls closer, and Red draws back until he hits the far wall of the cavern. Thanatos steps close and drags the knife across his cheek, delicately.

"Oh Little Bird," he croons. "Don't you want to finish our game?"

Red Robin smiles, nastily, and lashes out with his bo. Thanatos leaps back, lips curling in a feral grin mixed with a snarl. It's Red's turn to advance, pressing his advantage and knocking Thanatos off his feet. He leans over him, teeth bared.

"Gladly."

Song of the Apocalypse

Chapter Summary

Tim takes on Thanatos

Most teenagers don't picture their own grave when asked where they see themselves in twenty years. But then again, Tim Drake is not most teenagers. He walks the line between life and death with the ease of breathing. It's a dance, a game—trying to outrun the siren's call for as long as he can. He's been told he's working himself into an early grave more times than he can count, and he's long since accepted it. Still, Tim clings stubbornly to life, even as the dark inevitability slinks ever closer.

Fighting a man named after the god of death seems almost ironic, in a way. But this man is no god. He's a monster, a murderer, and a sadistic torturer, but he's not omnipotent or all-powerful. Red leans over Thanatos, teeth bared and ready to *fight,* bo staff clutched tightly in his grip.

Thanatos leaps up, forcing Red to scramble back, avoiding the swing of a blade aimed for his throat. Red counters with an arc of the bo, which connects with his shoulder. Thanatos growls, low in his throat, but he doesn't fall with the momentum of the hit. Red rolls out of the way as he returns with another strike, a forward lunge with the knife in his hands. He moves back to his feet in a smooth motion and disarms Thanatos, twisting the knife out of his grip and kicking it away from them.

The mercenary throws a punch, which connects with Red's jaw. His head snaps back, and he bites his tongue hard enough to draw blood. He spits in Thanatos' face, grinning in bloody amusement when the man scoffs in disgust, even though his skin is covered by his mask. Red rolls his eyes and sinks into a defensive stance, just as Thanatos regains his bearings and goes on the offensive again.

Red dodges another punch, and with a fluid motion, he twists his bo staff apart into two escrima sticks. He strikes with one, and when Thanatos moves to block, Red hits him with the second. They're just like Nightwing's weapons of choice—probably specifically designed that way by Slade—which means they're electrified at the ends. Red activates the taser and watches with a savage sense of satisfaction as Thanatos drops to one knee.

Thanatos kicks out, swiveling to balance his weight on his hands, knocking Red to the ground. His weapons roll out of his hands, just out of reach. He's winded from the blow, and he doesn't have enough time to recover before Thanatos pins him down with an arm at his throat and a knee resting heavily against his chest. With his free hand, Thanatos draws a serrated blade from his belt and buries it in Red's thigh. Red screams through gritted teeth, and he immediately becomes aware of two panicked voices in his ear.

"I swear to God, Baby Bird, if ya get fuckin' killed before we get to ya, I'll toss your dead ass in a Pit just to kill ya again myself," Hood growls.

"Seconded," Deathstroke adds. Red groans and struggles to buck Thanatos off his chest.

"Not the best time for commentary," he says, wheezing a little. He catches the moment of pause from Thanatos and rolls his eyes. "Not you, idiot." The snark earns him a twist of the knife, but it's worth it. Red uses the distraction to throw Thanatos off balance, rolling to his side and grabbing one of the escrima sticks. He swings his arm back, cracking the weapon against his opponent's collarbone. He hears the snap of bone, followed by a low hiss of pain.

"Well done," Thanatos says, tone mocking. There's an undercurrent of dangerous fury in his voice. He backs off enough for Red to stand, wobbling a little. The knife is still embedded in his skin. He forces the pain into the back of his mind, focusing instead on the mercenary

standing a few feet away. “I’m impressed, Little Bird. You’re capable of such *beautiful* violence. Care to reconsider my offer before I kill you?”

“Oh, fuck *off,”* Red says with an exasperated sigh. Thanatos shakes his head in disappointment, and Red twists his bo staff back into one piece, readying himself for the next move.

“Pity,” Thanatos says. He stands casually, hands resting against his belt, and Red narrows his eyes. He’s not sure what the mercenary is planning, but it can’t be good. Thanatos could’ve slit his throat when he’d had Red pinned, but he chose not to.

“We’re through the debris!” Hood says into his ear, sounding pleased, and suddenly, he realizes what Thanatos is doing. He’s stalling, waiting for Red’s backup to arrive.

Red scans the room surreptitiously, and when he spots the charges at the mouth of the tunnel’s entrance, he understands. He’s almost certain Thanatos has a detonator within reach—probably tucked away in his belt. He’ll kill Deathstroke and the Red Hood while blocking Red’s only possible path to escape. He has to destroy the detonator before Thanatos gets the chance to use it, and he has to warn the others without giving away his advantage.

“Hood,” he murmurs into the comm. “Protocol: Oscar Sierra.” He keeps an eye on his opponent’s cautious retreat toward the other end of the cavern. A table laden with weapons sits at the far wall.

“Aw fuck,” Hood replies. “Protocol: Oh Shit? What got fucked this time?”

“The warehouse in Ethiopia,” Red says. His tone is apologetic, because

he hates the bitter taste the words leave in his mouth. He knows they'll cut straight to the heart of his brother, but he'll understand the message.

"Fuckin' fantastic," Hood mutters. "Hear that, Deathstroke? Somethin's set to explode. Again."

Thanatos reaches for a handgun and shoots twice in rapid succession. Red dives out of the line of fire, grabbing a few Batarangs from his harness as he moves. He tosses them at the lanterns lighting the cavern, each hitting with deadly precision. They're plunged into pitch darkness, and Red moves silently toward Thanatos, whiteout lenses already adjusted to night vision. Thanatos has both hands braced against the table, and Red steels himself. He grabs the hilt of the knife in his leg and pulls it free. He's left with a Batarang in one hand and the serrated knife in the other, and with only a moment of hesitation, he uses both of them to pin Thanatos' hands to the table.

Thanatos howls, and it's a primal sound, barely human. Red backs up, neatly dodging a powerful kick. His breath shudders in his lungs with horror and relief. He digs through the pockets in Thanatos' belt until he finds the detonator.

"Baby Bird!" He hears Hood shout. Red turns and sees his brother running toward him, closely followed by his cousin. Hood catches him just as he sways on his feet, the wound in his leg bleeding freely.

"Damn, kid," Deathstroke says, observing the thrashing mercenary with an amused chuckle. "You've got him pinned like a butterfly. Nice work." Hood helps lower Red to the ground and begins to patch up his leg before he passes out from the blood loss. Thanatos lets out a laugh, hysterical and pained.

"Oh, what fine company you keep, Little Bird. Cultivating your talents

with the Red Hood and Deathstroke the Terminator is no better than becoming *my* apprentice." He sneers through bloody teeth. "You'll come to me when you're done with them, and I'll finally have you under my wing. *This isn't over."*

"Can you please knock him out?" Red hisses through gritted teeth. Deathstroke glances back at him briefly and shrugs. He draws his katana and cuts Thanatos' head off before Red can even begin to react. Thanatos' body goes slack, still pinned in place by the hands. Deathstroke pulls his sword free from the table, where it had cut into the wood. Blood trails from the edge of the table and drips onto the floor. "What the fuck," Red says, mouth gaping.

"Sorry," Deathstroke says, sounding not very sorry at all. "I might or might not have taken on a contract against the guy." Hood snorts, and Deathstroke picks up the rag Thanatos used earlier to polish his knife, wiping the blood off his blade. Red leans his forehead against Hood's shoulder, breathing in gunpowder and leather, and groans.

His brother and cousin just laugh at him. They're amused, but he can still hear the relief in their voices, because Thanatos was wrong. It *is* over.

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Dick paces the length of the Batcave, back and forth and back again, for hours. He's waiting for news, anxious to hear whether his brothers are safe or not. The Titans are huddled together by the medbay, knowing the trio of Tim, Jason, and Slade would most likely head back to the Cave after their mission. Bruce is at the Batcomputer, brooding over some old cold case files, and Cass is sparring against Steph and Damian over by the training mats. Dick makes another lap around the Cave, anxiously chewing at his lip. He's just about to head over to the aerialist equipment when Kon waves him over.

“Any word?” Dick asks, fingers tapping at his thigh. The Titans shake their heads, but they don’t look worried. Logically, Dick knows he shouldn’t be as nervous as he is, but he can’t help it. He won’t feel better until he knows his brothers are safe.

“We wanted a word,” Kon says coolly. He folds his arms, leaning a hip against one of the cabinets lining the walls.

“Are you going to threaten me?” Dick asks, and his voice sounds like an ocean trench, weighed down and dark. “Because I know what’ll happen if I fuck up with Tim again.”

“Nah,” Bart says, waving him off. “It’s storytime, Dick.”

“You know how Tim disappeared pretty quickly once Bruce started treating him like a threat, right?” Kon starts. He waits for Dick to nod before he continues, expression flat, unimpressed. “He went completely underground. None of us even knew where he was for half a year. Then he showed back up at the Tower. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week—like he hadn’t eaten for even longer. He was sick and injured, and he told us he’d *died* two weeks before.”

“I only just learned about that,” Dick admits quietly.

“You blew him off earlier that day, and you ignored his emergency beacon when he needed you,” Cassie reminds him. Her expression is calm, but it lacks its usual warmth. “He died, and then he went to work the next day, like it meant nothing. He worked himself sick, and it wasn’t until he came home that anyone even noticed how badly he was doing.”

“We finally got him back to a healthy place,” Kon says, glowering at him. “Being around you Bats fucks with his head. We won’t let you

put him back into that position *ever* again."

"I know," Dick says. "I'm glad he has you guys, and even though I hate that I can't be that person for him anymore, I understand why." His eyes burn, and he swipes furiously at his face, willing himself not to break. He's still struggling with how badly things have gone with his brother. He sits on one of the medical beds and drops his head into his hands.

"We're only saying this because Tim is going to downplay how fucked up he was after you and the rest of the Bats cast him out," Kon says. "He still loves you guys, and we're not going to stop him from trying to reconnect. We're going to protect him, though. If he starts to slip again, we'll do whatever it takes to keep him from going over the edge."

"I get it. I'll try to keep the others in line, too." Dick looks over toward Bruce and sighs. "I just hope we can be better."

"We're on our way back," Hood's voice rings out across the Cave. The Titans stiffen, and Dick leaps to his feet. "Thanatos is dead." There's a pause, followed by a harsh sigh from Hood. "And before you ask, *no,* I didn't kill him."

"What is Red Robin's status?" Bruce asks. Dick sees the subtle shift in his posture, the way his knuckles tighten against the arms of his chair and the clenching of his jaw. He looks like he's ready to leap into battle, but there aren't any enemies for him to fight, except for the ones in his own head.

"Annoyed," Red's voice replies. The entire Cave seems to let out a sigh of relief. He's okay. "Forget the insane mercenary out for my blood; Hood and Deathstroke are going to be the death of me."

“Aw c’mon, Baby Bird,” Hood teases, laughing around his words. “You love us.”

“I can still kick your ass, even injured,” Red says.

“You’re injured?” Steph asks, standing with her hands on her hips. She’s frowning at one of the speakers in the Cave, as though Red can feel her disapproval through it. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Red says smoothly. “Just got lightly stabbed.” He says it so casually, it takes Dick a moment to fully process the words. His jaw drops open, and he can hear Steph make some sort of indignant squawk. “ETA five minutes. Red Robin out.”

Sure enough, five minutes later, two motorcycles and one inconspicuous, black car drive into the Cave. Taking his helmet off, Jason hops off his motorcycle and grins at the Bats and Titans gathered around the circle of vehicles. Tim gets to his feet with less grace, tugging his cowl down as he goes. The bandage around his leg is already stained red, and his face is paler than usual. Slade exits the car and claps a hand on Tim’s shoulder, wordlessly leading him to the medbay.

Alfred is already waiting for them, and he shoos everyone away—except for Jason and Slade, who also need to be looked over for injury. He expertly patches them up, and soon enough, the three of them are released back into the care of the larger group. The Titans immediately swarm Tim, hugging him close and murmuring to each other too softly to hear. Jason moves to where Cass and Steph are waiting, ruffling Damian’s hair as he passes.

Which leaves Slade with Bruce and Dick. He studies them with

indifference, and the look in his eye makes Dick feel like he's drowning. He almost seems disappointed.

"You killed Hawthorne," Bruce says, after a long moment of weighted silence. Slade nods, once.

"The contract was just a bonus," he replies, a smirk creeping along the line of his mouth. "I was going to kill him, regardless."

Bruce and Dick exchange a glance, and Dick knows they're going to have to investigate just who Slade's employer is, once everything dies down. Slade seems to know it, too, judging by the smug look on his face. Dick sighs and scrubs a hand across his face. As grateful as he is for Slade's help, he doesn't like working with him. He glances over, where the Titans have circled around his little brother.

Tim is leaning heavily against Cassie, his face tucked into the crook of her neck. Her fingers thread through his hair, an almost unconscious gesture. Bart has his arms wrapped around Tim's waist, and Kon's got an arm draped around Tim's shoulders. It warms Dick's heart to see Tim get the affection he deserves—has so badly needed since he was a small child—but breaks his heart to not be able to do the same. Cassie looks up and offers him an uncertain smile. She nudges Kon, who follows her gaze, and with a roll of his eyes, waves him over.

Dick leaves Bruce and Slade to their awkward stare-down and joins the Titans. Tim is practically asleep on his feet, but he turns his head and cracks an eye open at the sound of approaching footsteps. He smiles, gently extricating himself from the Titans' grip on him. He nearly tumbles, but Dick steadies him before he can lose his balance. Dick tugs him close, wrapping him up in his arms and pressing a cheek against the top of his head. Tim melts into the hug.

"Hi," Tim mumbles sleepily.

“Hi yourself,” Dick replies, voice bleeding fondness. He’s so relieved to be able to hold his little brother like this again. He silently vows to himself to do it as often as he can. “You okay?”

“Mhm. Just tired.”

“You can rest if you want, Timmy. I’ve got you.” Dick pauses, wondering if that was the right thing to say, but he relaxes when Tim’s eyes shut. He looks up to see the Titans watching him, a less than subtle reminder not to take this show of trust for granted. When Tim’s breathing evens out, he’s a little astonished. Sure, Tim must’ve been exhausted after the fight, but to let himself fully relax around Dick is something else entirely.

Cass walks over to them with silent steps, a fond smile gracing her features. She brushes Tim’s hair out of his eyes. She presses a feather-light kiss against his temple, expression warmer than Dick’s ever seen it.

“I can take him,” she says softly. “Upstairs.” Dick carefully passes Tim to her, and she effortlessly picks him up. She nods at the Titans and gives a thoughtful look. A moment passes with their eyes locked, before she smiles again. “Don’t overthink. Just love him.”

“Yeah,” Dick says around the lump in his throat. “I will.”

He knows it’s not that simple, but her advice is sound. Tim deserves all the love he can give and so much more. All Dick can do is keep trying to be the best brother he can to his siblings. He glances back over his shoulder at Bruce. He wants to be the best son he can be, too, but he has a feeling that might mean he’ll need to have a long talk with Bruce about how to make amends with Tim. After all, they might

not deserve Tim, but he definitely deserves to have as many people in his life who love him as possible. He knows Bruce loves his son—of *course* he does—but doesn't see why they've gotten so distant.

Maybe they can have an intervention, with a banner and everything. He bets even Jason will help him, especially if he gets to screw with Bruce. Now that he thinks of it, Damian has made his amends with Tim, too. He'll probably be willing to talk some sense into his father, if Dick can put the right spin on how to approach the subject with his prickly little brother. The Titans will be *more* than happy to tear into Bruce, and Cass and Steph are always ready to stand up for Tim. Babs might stay out of it, but she's pretty practical. If she thinks they have a chance of knocking some sense into Bruce, she'll help. And of course, there's Alfred. If anyone can make Bruce see reason, it's Alfred. It might take some convincing, but Dick thinks he can get him to join in.

Dick smiles, a bit wickedly. He fishes his phone from his pocket and starts looking for places to order a banner from. This could actually be fun. At the very least, it'll let Tim see the family rallying behind him, and that just might make a difference.

Fallout

Chapter Summary

Bruce gets an intervention. Conversations are had.

Chapter Notes

In case you missed it, I posted a short little what-if earlier this week, in which Tim meets Jason while he's stealing Batman's tires. Check it out, if you'd like!

As always, I hope you enjoy!

Jason's pretty sure his eyes are burning. When Dick said he wanted to get a banner for their little intervention, Jason hadn't thought he'd been serious. He should've known better. Dick is an idiot sometimes, but he always manages to be a showman at the worst possible moments. The banner is *ugly*. It's a violent shade of yellow, with lime green polka dots and red lettering, spelling out: *Benadryl for Your Soul: How Not to be Allergic to Emotions.* Jason shakes his head, sick of looking at the monstrosity, and turns toward his older brother instead.

"You're a moron, Big Wing," he says. "And the worst designer I've ever met." Dick pouts, but he doesn't seem all that offended. It's a well known fact that Dick Grayson is a fashion disaster. Jason sighs, blinking and still seeing the green spots behind his eyelids. "How's Timbit?"

"Still sleeping," Dick says. He frowns, looking over toward the staircase. "Cass has been staying with him." His shoulders slump a little, but he's quick to shake off whatever's on his mind. He offers Jason a smile and loops an arm around his elbow. "C'mon, you're helping me hang this up."

Jason grumbles about it, but he helps anyway. Dick drags him to one of the smaller sitting rooms, where they hang up the ugly banner. Once that's done, Dick runs off to gather the rest of the family, as well

as the Titans. Steph throws herself onto one of the couches, and Jason sits next to her. She kicks her feet up into his lap, sticking her tongue out at him when he protests. She pulls out her phone, ready to take a photo of Bruce's face when he realizes what's going on. The Titans enter the room as a unit, on edge but determined. Alfred leads Damian in, and Jason laughs aloud when Damian scoffs at the sight of the banner. That just leaves Bruce, who comes following after Dick a moment later. Dick's grin is exuberant, and Bruce's expression twists into something vastly exasperated when he sees the family and Tim's team gathered in the room, with the ugly banner as its centerpiece.

"Why did I adopt children," he mutters to himself, letting Dick guide him to one of the armchairs in the room.

"Because you love us, B," Dick says brightly. "Which is why we're here."

"This is about Tim," Bruce says. Jason has to bite back a sarcastic retort, because Alfred is in the room, and he doesn't want to be scolded for his language again. Bruce sighs heavily, a sound weighed down by years of mistakes. "I've been trying to understand how I've hurt him."

"We can help with that," Bart says. His bright eyes have a dark edge to them, like a dare. He and the other Titans are less forgiving than Tim is, and they're still furious on his behalf. Jason's honestly surprised they've taken to him as well as they have. It's less than he deserves.

"Easy," Cassie murmurs, placing a hand on Bart's shoulder. "Let's see what the Bat has to say for himself, first." She fixes a hard look on Bruce's face. The challenge is in her eyes, too—steely and burning with anger.

“I haven’t been there for him,” Bruce starts slowly. “I pushed him away and made him feel…unappreciated.”

“Don’t forget unwelcome and unwanted,” Kon snarls. He’s visibly tense with cold fury. Bruce meets his anger with resignation. He nods at Kon, face grim.

“Yes, and there’s no excuse for it. He’s one of my children, and I love him unconditionally. I failed to express that to him. I failed to temper Damian and Jason’s animosity toward him, and I was far harsher toward him than my other children.”

“Why is that?” Steph asks. “I mean, sure, you love your kids or whatever, but Tim thinks you held him to a harsher standard because he wasn’t picked, like the others were.” She rolls her eyes. “You haven’t really done much to dispute that line of thinking, but an explanation might help.”

“It isn’t that I love him less or view him as more likely to go dark. I just,” Bruce frowns, trying to summon the words. “He’s capable. I want him to be the best he can. He’s already a better detective than I am.” Bruce scrubs a hand over his face.

“So, ya treat him worse than the kids who’ve actually offed people?” Jason asks, raising a brow. “Makes zero sense, old man. It’s a wonder the kid hasn’t snapped.”

“He certainly could destroy all of you,” Cassie says coolly. “Easily. But he wouldn’t. You’ve never given him enough credit, and the one time he *almost* crossed the line, he walked himself back, and you still treated him like a threat.”

“Tim needs people in his corner,” Dick says, voice gentle. He places a

hand on Bruce's shoulder and offers a smile. "I know I haven't been great at being there for him, either, but that shouldn't stop us from trying to support him however we can." He glances back at the banner, drawing everyone else's eyes to it. "You're the best father figure he's ever had." He ignores the snort from Steph and the annoyed huff from Kon. "That means you need to be there for him, not just as a vigilante, but as *Bruce."*

"He went to the ends of the earth for you," Kon says. He crosses his arms, leaning against the wall and glaring at Bruce. "He deserves more than silence and people who only care about him for how useful he is. Yeah, he's capable, but he's also one of the best people I know. We," he gestures to the Titans, who are nodding along with him, "care about Tim for who he is, not what he does for us."

"I care about Tim," Bruce says. He sounds tired, more worn down than Jason has heard from him in years. "I'm not good with expressing that sentiment, and worse, I've neglected to spend time with him as I should. I'd like to rectify that—not to ingratiate Red Robin to the Bats, but because I miss my son."

"So talk to him," Dick says, encouraging and optimistic as ever. "Tell him that, and try to make an effort with him. Acknowledge where you went wrong, and I think he'll be willing to listen to you. Tim loves you a lot, B."

"And stop with the double standards," Steph says. "Seriously, playing favorites is such a bad parenting move, intentions aside."

"Show him he's wanted," Jason says. "Kid's had it hard. He's not used to the idea of family as it should be."

"His parents gave him a skewed view of what it means to care about someone," Dick adds. "He was neglected for years, B. You know that,

and you know how much Tim has lost, too. He needs to know he won't lose you, no matter what."

"He thinks he already has," Jason says. His phone rings in his jacket pocket, and when he looks at the caller ID, he scowls. "Sorry, gotta take this. Contact of mine," he says with a shrug. He stands and excuses himself from the room, stepping out onto the front porch. "Sionis, is it done?"

"Of course it is, Hood. I wouldn't be calling if the job weren't done."

"No need to get all defensive on me," Jason says, chuckling. "Pleasure to do business with you."

"Likewise," Sionis says with a hum. "And is there a reason the account you had me transfer the funds to isn't under your preferred alias?"

"No reason which concerns you," Jason replies smoothly. "The drugs?"

"Safely shipped and delivered."

Sionis makes small talk for another minute before excusing himself, and Jason hangs up the phone with a slight smirk. He sends a message to Slade's burner phone, just to confirm the funds were transferred to his account. Black Mask officially funded the hit against Thanatos. Red Hood's gang had already delivered a large shipment of drugs outside the city, and recently, they've *somehow* been acquired by Black Mask. It's purely coincidence, of course—definitely not a drug trade funding a hit. Slade responds to his message, confirming his payment, which means the entire deal went smoothly—a rarity in Gotham.

Jason strolls back inside, whistling a tune as he taps out a reply.

**

Tim groans and rolls over, feeling like he's been hit by a bus. He opens his eyes, unsurprised when he sees he isn't alone. Cass smiles at him and waves. She's curled up in a chair by his bedside, a book open in her lap. Her expression is warm, and it makes Tim instinctively smile back at her. He reaches out, and she takes his hand.

"Sleepyhead," she teases. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah, Tim says, squeezing her hand. "Less like death warmed over, at least. More human." She snorts, and Tim lets go of her to sit up. "How long have I been out?" He still feels tired and achy, but he wasn't lying. He really does feel better.

"Few hours, long enough for trouble." She smiles wryly, and Tim sighs, raising a brow at her. "Dick."

Tim groans. Of course Dick would stir up trouble. He doesn't want to know what's going on, so he rolls back over, burying his face in his pillow. Cass laughs at him, a soft, gentle sound. She tucks the blanket back over his shoulders and ruffles his hair. She goes back to her book, reading aloud in slow, stilted sentences. Tim lets himself relax, almost drifting back to sleep to the sound of his sister's voice. The door opens some time later, and he hears Cass stop reading and the soft thud as she closes the book.

"Love you," she says, patting his shoulder gently. The door shuts again, and Tim supposes he should face whatever trouble Dick managed to get him into.

“Bruce?” Tim asks, sitting back up. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to check in on you,” Bruce says. He crosses the room and sits in the chair Cass just left. “And I wanted to apologize to you. Properly, this time.”

“Properly,” Tim says, tone a bit sardonic. He’s not particularly optimistic. “What did Dick do?”

“He organized an intervention,” Bruce says. Tim snorts, and Bruce’s mouth quirks up into the ghost of a smile. “It helped me sort through what I want to say to you. I want to fix this distance between us, son, and I know it’s on me to do that. If you’ll let me.”

“Go on,” Tim says flatly.

“I’ve not been fair to you,” Bruce says. His expression shifts into something mournful. It reminds Tim of the look he’d often see on the man’s face during his early days as Robin, after Jason had died. “I’ve spent more of my time with Red Robin than I have with Tim recently, and I didn’t even realize it. I let you slip away, and I had no clue.” He sighs, and Tim stays silent, watching him. “Do you truly believe I don’t care for you as much as I care for your brothers?”

“I’m a detective, Bruce,” Tim replies. His tone isn’t quite frosty, but it’s close. “I work with evidence. What else is there to say?” Bruce cringes a little, frown deepening. The grief in his eyes hardens to resolve.

“I want to fix it,” he says. He looks as though he’s about to say more, but Tim speaks first.

“Why?”

“Why do I want to fix things with you?” Bruce asks, and Tim nods. “Because I want to have you in my life, Tim.”

“You haven’t ever wanted me around, not really, and *especially* not after I pulled you back out of the timestream. What changed?”

“Tim…” Bruce looks pained. “In the beginning, I didn’t want to get another Robin killed, but you were Robin from the moment you decided I needed someone at my side. I didn’t want to be responsible for this incredible, bright young man throwing himself at danger and getting hurt, especially not when he already had a family of his own.”

“Right,” Tim says slowly. “Family.”

“I didn’t understand at the time, because I didn’t want to, but Tim, you were my son from the moment you walked into my life. I care about you, and that has *never* changed. I’m sorry it’s taken me this long to tell you.”

“I get it,” Tim says. He sighs, chest feeling tight. “But after you disappeared, and things fell through here, I don’t know. I guess I was hoping you’d fix it. I know you couldn’t take Robin away from Damian, not like what happened to me, but maybe you’d at least *try*. I’d lost *everything,* B. I got some of it back, but my life was completely wrecked, and I’m still picking up the pieces.”

“I should’ve asked what happened to you while I was gone. You were so different, so damaged, and I wanted to give you time to come to me. But then you stopped coming home, stopped calling, and I didn’t

push. I didn't see how badly you needed someone to reach out first, for once." Bruce runs a hand through his hair, and after a moment, he reaches out. Tim hesitates before putting his palm against Bruce's. Their eyes meet, and Bruce's grip on his hand tightens, thick, calloused fingers squeezing his like a lifeline. "I'm sorry, Tim, truly. I understand my inaction has hurt you, but I hope you know how much I love you. You're my son, my child, and I will never, *ever* stop caring about you."

Tim's fingers twitch, trapped in Bruce's grip. He bites his lip, struggling to maintain his calm mask, but it slips when the heat behind his eyes spills over. He chokes on a sob and curls in on himself. He hates this—hates feeling out of control of himself, but he can't stop crying. Bruce draws him close, and Tim lets him. He's shaking with each sob, lungs shuddering as he breathes. He presses his face against Bruce's chest and cries.

It's been so long since Bruce has held him like this. He's the closest thing Tim has ever had to a father, and the jagged hole in Tim's life has left an ache of *lack,* heavy in his bones for years. Now that he's here, pulling Tim close and murmuring hushed reassurances into his ear, Tim can't help but curl closer, wrapping his arms around Bruce's torso. A hand cards through his hair, and another rubs gentle circles at his back. Tim's hands clutch at the material of Bruce's sweater as he turns his face to rest his cheek against Bruce's sternum. He glances up, wondering what expression he'll spot on the man's face.

There's no judgement in those dark eyes, only a soft sadness. Tim still hasn't quite stopped crying, pouring out all the grief and anger he's carefully hidden away for years. He sniffles a little, feeling raw, like his insides have been scraped out with a spoon. He wipes at his eyes with a hand, the fabric of his shirt sleeve soft against his skin. He tries to reassemble his stoic mask, but it's cracked beyond repair, leaving him defenseless. He doesn't want to keep feeling like this, but he's too tired to fight back the waves of emotion battering against his heart.

They settle into quiet after Tim's harsh sobs subside, leaving him exhausted. Bruce doesn't let him go, though. He moves to settle next

to Tim on the bed, keeping his son close. Part of Tim wants to break away from the hold, but he's so tired of holding himself at a distance. He leans into the warmth and the steadiness.

"I'm sorry," Bruce says softly, practically a whisper. "I'm so sorry I didn't see what this was doing to you. I'm sorry I wasn't there to fix it. I'm here now, though, and I'm not leaving you again."

"Everyone always leaves me," Tim says, voice wrecked. "I can't lose you like that again."

"You won't. I promise. You'll always be my son, my brilliant, selfless Tim." Tim closes his eyes, wanting more than anything to believe him. He's still shaking, limbs trembling faintly as he struggles with what to say. Bruce continues to speak reassurances in that low, rumbling tone —Bruce's truest voice. There's no trace of the Bat or of Brucie in his words, and as comforting as it is, Tim still can't let go of the old hurts. The wounds have been torn open again and again, but now, they're visible to everyone, not just Tim. It leaves him feeling vulnerable and more than a little uncertain.

"I want things to be better," Tim finally croaks. "I just don't want to be disappointed again. It always happened with my parents, and even after I got used to it, it still hurt. I trust you with my life, Bruce, but I can't just stop feeling like this." He shakes his head, frustrated. "I don't even know what I'm feeling, most of the time. It's hard to explain."

"You don't have to explain or justify yourself. Your job is to be happy, Tim, and it's my responsibility to make sure that happens. That's all that matters right now."

"I don't know if I know how to be happy," Tim admits.

“Then be content,” Bruce says, brushing the hair from Tim’s eyes. “Sometimes, that’s all we can ask for.” He pauses for a moment, searching for the right words. “I want you to be content with your life, Tim, and that means I’ll do whatever I can to help you. I’m not always going to know what you need, though, so can I ask you to talk to me when that happens?”

“I can do that,” Tim says. “I…I want to work on this—our family. Because as much as I’ve tried to just forget and move on, I still really care about you guys. Even when I thought I meant nothing to you, I just wanted the best for you. I can’t promise forgiveness or trust right now, but I can promise that I want you and the others to be happy, too.”

“It’ll make us happy to have you back,” Bruce says. He offers Tim a small but genuine smile. “However much of yourself you’re willing to share with us is up to you, but having you in our lives is enough.”

Another tear slides down Tim’s cheek as he nods, and Bruce wipes it away with a thumb before it can slip off his jaw. He’s not brimming with rage or aching, gnawing sadness, but something in him feels cracked. Some sort of wall he’s been using to stop himself from processing his emotions has crumbled into rubble, and he’s helpless against the sweeping feeling as it drags the tears from him.

The jagged wound left in his family’s wake still burns, but its teeth aren’t chewing on Tim’s heart anymore. He thinks something might be starting to fill in the edges, smoothing them out and easing them closed, slowly. It’s not healed yet, but the hurt isn’t either agonizing or numb—the way it has been for years, one or the other and nothing else. The twisting feeling in his heart is replacing the emptiness with something else.

Something like hope.

When the Dust Settles

Chapter Summary

Tim goes home

“Are you sure about this?” Dick asks, wringing his hands together. He looks anxious, like Tim is going to take off and disappear with the wind. Tim rolls his eyes, but he offers Dick a smile, regardless.

“I’m sure. The Titans need their leader back. I’ve been gone for too long, and besides, you don’t need me here in Gotham right now.”

“But we want you here.”

“Yes, well…” Tim trails off, feeling off-kilter. “Thanks. I just need a little more time to get used to that, honestly.” He hesitates for a moment before dragging Dick into a hug. His older brother practically melts against him, pulling Tim closer and burying his face in his hair. “Don’t worry, Dick. I’ll be back soon.”

“Promise?” Dick asks, and his voice sounds strained. Tim understands Dick’s desperation to cling to his brother like smoke. He’s felt that same need himself far too many times, so his heart twists in his chest as he leans back and looks into Dick’s watery eyes. “I don’t want to lose you again, Timmy.”

“I promise. You never lost me—not really.” That might’ve been the wrong thing to say, judging from the heartbroken look Dick gives him. His words are true, though. He’s always felt like *he’s* the one who lost the Bats. He’s always been there for them, and now, they’re finally willing to reciprocate. The only time they’ve ever really lost him is when his heart stopped beating. The thought seems to cross Dick’s mind, too, because he pulls Tim close again, running his fingers through his little brother’s hair, resting his cheek against the top of his

head.

“I’m going to be better,” he whispers. Tim pretends not to notice the tears wetting his hair, and instead, he wraps his arms around his brother and holds on with all his might. “I love you so much, little brother.”

“Love you too,” Tim murmurs. He gently extricates himself from Dick’s arms and gives him a small, genuine smile. He hates goodbyes, but at least this one doesn’t feel permanent, doesn’t feel like he’s tearing out his heart and leaving it behind as he goes. “The Titans are waiting in the plane. I should—”

“Hey there, ya fuckin’ heathen,” Jason calls out as he descends the stairs into the Cave, interrupting Tim’s sentence and train of thought. He tosses a bag of marshmallows at Tim’s head, which he manages to catch before it smacks him in the face. “I brought your favorite culinary abomination, for the road.”

“Thanks Jay!” Tim says brightly. Jason walks over and ruffles Tim’s hair, smiling crookedly. He loops an arm around Tim’s shoulders and snorts when Tim eagerly rips open the bag and pops a marshmallow into his mouth. Jason scrunches his nose in disgust, and Tim laughs at his expression, pleased with the gift and his brother’s annoyance.

“For the *road,* Timbit, sheesh. Fuckin’ heathen, indeed.” Jason shakes his head, looking both fond and exasperated. “Take care of yourself, kid,” he says. His smile shifts from teasing to something much warmer. Tim nods and wraps his free arm around Jason. It’s still so surreal to be this close to the Red Hood without a fight breaking out, but Tim isn’t complaining.

Alfred, Bruce and Damian enter the Cave together a moment later. Bruce has a hand on Damian’s shoulder, chatting with his son—a

relaxed expression on his face. They join the group of brothers near the hangar, closely followed by the girls. Even Babs made the trip to say goodbye. Tim gives each of them hugs, holding the family he thought he'd lost close.

Cass steps up first, smiling so warmly at him, and Tim feels like a ray of sunshine has landed on his face. He pulls her close and stays there for a long moment, wrapped up in her arms. Cass steps up onto her tiptoes and presses a feathery kiss to his cheek, reminding him to be careful. She draws back, and Stephanie practically throws herself into his arms, wrapping him up in a tight hug. She pulls back and lightly punches him in the arm. Tim feigns injury by staggering back into Jason—who catches him, thankfully—complaining loudly.

"You're officially grounded from being kidnapped by psychos for at least another month, young man," Steph warns, pointing a finger at him. Her nails are painted a bright shade of purple, and Tim is struck with the thought that some things really don't ever change. Steph's grin is as it's always been—bright and dazzling and brimming with a fiery sort of energy.

Babs and Tim exchange their farewells, and Tim can feel himself thawing in his interactions with the Bats, just a little more, day by day. He hasn't had a quarrel with Barbara, but her association with Dick, especially, had soured his attitude toward her. During his long time away from the family, he never fully lost touch with her, but he'd been cordial, at best. Babs seems relieved to see him being more open again. She ruffles his hair and tells him not to get into too much trouble with the Titans, and then she pushes him over toward Bruce and Damian. Damian hesitates, but he finally allows Tim to pull him into a hug. He grumbles as he wraps his arms around Tim's torso.

"Goodbye Timothy," Damian says. "Travel safely, and enjoy your time with your team."

"Thanks Damian," Tim replies, bemused. It's still so strange to hear

Damian sound polite, if not downright nice. “I’ll be back soon, and we can find a case to work together.” Damian actually smiles at that, stepping back with a brisk nod.

Alfred also lets Tim hug him, but of course, Tim had never doubted his own safety when giving Alfred hugs. He wishes Tim well in his warm but formal manner, and finally, Bruce steps close and pulls Tim into his arms. Tim relaxes into the hold, familiarity and warmth seeping into his weary bones.

“Hey B,” he says softly. He hears Bruce sigh and murmur his own greeting against his hair. “I’ll be back soon, so you don’t have to worry, okay?”

“I always worry about my kids. That’s my job,” Bruce says. “But I know you can take care of yourself. Just don’t think you *have* to. I’m only ever a phone call away.”

“Is that a reminder for Red Robin or for Tim Drake?” He asks, a little wary. He still can’t shake off his instinctual need to shelter himself from whatever hurts others might inflict on him. He doubts he ever really will, but he’s trying.

“Mostly for Tim,” Bruce admits with a low chuckle. “But Batman has Red Robin’s back, too, if he ever needs a hand. Either way, I promise I’ll be there for you, son.”

“Thank you,” Tim says. He steps back and offers Bruce a smile. It’s small and tremulous, but it’s there, nonetheless.

“Call me when your flight lands?” Bruce asks. “I want to know you made it back safely.” Tim nods, and some of the tension in Bruce’s shoulders eases. “Good. I’ll look forward to hearing from you, and I’ll

be even more glad to see you again soon."

"Yeah," Tim says, smiling. It feels less like the smiles he's given them over the past couple of years—less the sharp, wicked grin of Red Robin, less the bland, disinterested smile of Timothy Drake. *This* smile is all Tim, a little lopsided quirk of his mouth and an affection which is almost painfully sincere. "I'm looking forward to it, too."

He casts one last look at the Bats—his family—and boards the plane. The Titans are waiting for him, trying to act as though they haven't been eavesdropping the entire time. Tim rolls his eyes at Bart's pitiful attempt to look innocent, and he moves to the controls.

"Ready to go home?" He calls over his shoulder. He's met with a resounding *yes* from his friends, and Tim guides the Batwing out of the hangar and into the open skies.

The flight is an easy one Tim's done a thousand times before, so he lets his mind drift a little as he takes them back toward San Francisco. He's eager to rejoin the others and finally get back to his usual routine. He's missed the easy understanding he has with the Titans. After feeling so uncertain for so long with the Bats, he's more than ready for some uncomplicated time with his teammates. Gar and Raven have been keeping an eye on things while he and the others were away, but the team will finally be whole again. The flight seems to speed by, and soon enough, they're landing at the Titans' Tower.

"Tim!" Gar shouts as soon as Tim exits the Batwing. He launches himself at Tim, who catches him easily, laughing. "I missed you!" Raven is a few steps behind him, smiling as she waves her own greeting.

"Hi guys," Tim says. "I missed you too. Dick says hey, by the way."

“You and Dick are really on speaking terms again?” Gar asks, tilting his head to the side like a confused puppy. Tim nods, and his eyes light up. “That’s great! I kind of thought Bart was joking when he told us.”

Tim laughs at Bart’s indignant shout, and he feels a sense of peace wash over him. He’s been reunited with his entire team, and he’s back home. He feels like he could sleep for a week, so he moves into the Tower, practically desperate to collapse in bed. Kon won’t let Tim take his own luggage, even though he’s mostly healed up already, so he and his friend make their way up to Tim’s rooms together. Kon sets Tim’s duffle bag down and watches as Tim flops down onto the bed with a groan. Tim turns his head to face his friend, laughing a little when Kon rolls his eyes at him.

“Get some sleep, nerd,” Kon says. He leaves a moment later, and Tim rolls onto his back, pulling his phone from his pocket. He dials Bruce’s number, and presses the phone to his ear, listening to the dial tone.

“Hello?”

“Hey B, it’s me,” Tim says. “Wanted to tell you I made it back okay.”

“Good,” Bruce says. *“How was the flight over?”*

“Mm, it was fine,” he says, voice drowsy. “Nothing crazy happened, and you don’t need to worry. The Titans didn’t destroy your plane.” He listens to Bruce’s soft laugh, and his heart warms a little at the sound.

“They’re a rambunctious lot,” he replies, fighting back the amusement

in his tone. *“You sound tired, though. Are you going to get some rest soon?”*

“Yeah,” Tim says. “I’m probably going to knock out any minute, honestly, but I did promise to call.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“Me too, B. Talk to you soon?” He receives the affirmative and hangs up the phone with a smile. He’s exhausted, but he’s almost deliriously happy.

He falls into the most peaceful sleep he’s had in ages.

**

“Ready to go?”

“Of course,” Robin says primly. Red grins, his teeth a flash of white in the darkness. They’re working on a case, as a favor to Jason. A large shipment of drugs had been stolen by Black Mask’s men a few weeks ago, and Jason had asked them to give him a hand in tracking them down. After Tim’s month in San Francisco, he’s finding himself glad to be back in Gotham, surprisingly enough.

Red had made short work of finding the drugs and the men who stole them, and he’d offered for Robin to join him in taking them out. The two of them crouch beside the skylight on the warehouse’s roof, looking down on the men milling about. Red carefully extracts the glass and instructs Robin to drop in first and head left. He follows a moment later, creeping along the shadowy catwalk in the opposite

direction. He and Robin get into position, and at Red's signal, the two vigilantes drop in on the unsuspecting men.

The fight is chaos. Red loses sight of Robin almost instantly as he's swarmed by the armed guards. He draws the bo staff Slade gave him and throws himself into battle. It's a thrill, a beautiful mess of noise and adrenaline and movement, and Red slips into a familiar rhythm, moving like silk as he dodges and strikes.

He and Robin make short work of Black Mask's men. They call in the GCPD and take off before the cops arrive, exchanging wild grins with one another as they land on a nearby rooftop. Red extends a fist, and even though he knows Robin is rolling his eyes, he bumps his fist against Red's anyways.

"Hey Hood, we caught your bad guys for you," Red says into his comm. Robin snickers at that, and Red's smile softens from razor wire to the concrete beneath their boots.

"Yeah, thanks and all that," Hood grumbles over the sound of Nightwing's laughter. The two of them are out doing undercover work tonight, and Nightwing definitely sounds like he's having a better time than Hood is. "Much obliged, Baby Bird, Bat Brat."

"Hope you two played nice," Nightwing says, still sounding vastly amused.

"Probably nicer than you and Hood," Red retorts. Robin snorts, and Red feels a flash of smugness. He's pleased he and Damian are actually getting along. "Don't forget to come back in one piece, okay you two?"

"Don't screw up," Robin adds, helpfully. He and Red make their way

back to the waiting car they'd stashed before staking out the warehouse, and once they sign off on their comms and start heading back toward the Cave, they exchange a glance and laugh.

"Those two are the worst team to do undercover work," Tim muses, pulling his cowl down. Damian takes off his domino mask, and when he looks over at Tim, his expression is amused.

"Who do you think will break cover first? My money's on Todd."

"Ten bucks says Dick messes up first," Tim counters. He and Damian shake on it as they pull into the garage in the Cave.

Alfred hovers, as he usually does when one of them comes back after a fight. Tim has a few shallow scrapes, and Damian has a few bumps and bruises, but they're both fine. Bruce stayed in that night, thanks to a fractured wrist. He offers both boys a ruffle of their hair and a few pointers, based on what he'd seen on the cowl footage. Damian soaks up the praise, smiling as genuinely as Tim has ever seen from him. He remembers Dick telling him a long time ago that Damian practically bleeds the need for acceptance. He can finally see it now. He wonders if it's because Damian is finally allowing himself to show that vulnerability around him or if he's just seeing past his own first impression.

"Good work out there," Tim says, offering his little brother a smile. Damian nods, as though he's expecting harsh words to follow, but Tim doesn't say anything else. He just waits for Damian to reply. Finally, after a long moment, he does.

"Thank you, Timothy. We worked well together."

"I'm proud of you boys," Bruce says. "Now why don't you head

upstairs, Damian? It's a school night, after all." Damian nods and runs off toward the showers. Bruce hands Tim a steaming mug of coffee and presses a kiss to his temple. "I know I should be telling you to get some rest, but I had a feeling you'd be waiting up for your brothers."

"Thanks B," Tim says, sipping happily from his mug. "Are you staying down here, too, or are you going to take advantage of your night off?"

"I'm taking advantage of my night off by working through a few cold cases. Want to keep me company?"

It strikes Tim how different Bruce's request is from what he was expecting. Bruce doesn't want a fresh pair of eyes or a second opinion. He just wants Tim to be there with him. Tim nods, once his brain catches up with himself, and he sinks into a chair next to Bruce, propping his feet up on Bruce's lap. Bruce rests a hand on his ankle, and Tim leans back, drinking his coffee and enjoying a moment of peace.

"Hey B," Dick's voice says over the comms, half an hour later. "We might've had some trouble, but we got the intel you needed!" Tim interrupts before Bruce can reply.

"Which one of you two idiots was it?"

"Dickhead here blew our cover," Jason replies, sounding even grouchier than he had earlier in the night. "Nearly got both our asses shot."

"Ha! Damian owes me ten bucks."

“Timmy, you bet against me?” Dick whines, sounding scandalized. “That’s so mean!”

“Sound advice: never bet against Tim,” Bruce says. “Are you both alright?” They both confirm they’re uninjured, and Bruce sighs, relieved. Tim lets himself relax fully, now that he knows his brothers are on their way home.

Dick and Jason arrive shortly after, bickering as they join Bruce and Tim by the computer. Jason smacks Dick upside the head, and Dick pouts at him. Dick catches sight of Tim and drapes himself over the back of his chair, grinning happily at Tim. He’s sideways and upside-down, but he somehow manages to wrap his arms around his little brother without issue.

“Hi there, little brother!” He presses a sloppy kiss to Tim’s cheek, which Tim immediately wipes away. Dick just laughs at him, blue eyes alight with joy and mischief.

“Hi Dick,” Tim says. “Care to let me go? I can’t move my arms, and I need them to reach my coffee.” He sighs when Dick only wraps himself around Tim even tighter. “Jason? Can you help me out here?”

“Better you than me,” Jason says simply. He elbows Tim in the ribs, and Tim lets out an indignant grumble in response. “Welcome back, Baby Bird.”

“It’s good to be back.” Back in Gotham, back with the Bats, back to having a family—he’s not sure which one he’s really talking about, but it’s true in every respect. He has the Titans and the Bats at his back now, and things seem to be slotting into place, when—for the longest time—Tim thought he was the mismatched piece of the puzzle. It’s strange still, but it’s good, and Tim thinks, for once, things might just turn out okay.

July

Chapter Summary

Tim comes home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning ushers in light and heat, stagnant above the air in shimmering waves. It's one of those rare, beautiful days in which sunshine touches Gotham, and the lazy haze of summer settles over the city with a contented sigh. July nineteenth greets the world with clear skies, and Tim wakes up in his room at the manor to the buttery sunlight streaming through his curtains. He sits up and stretches, yawning. He gets out of bed and moves to the window, staring out over the sprawling gardens—meticulously maintained by Alfred—and lets himself take in the gorgeous late morning. He hears a knock at his door and turns, smiling, as Dick enters his room and runs to tackle him into a hug, knocking them both to the floor.

"Happy birthday, Timmy!" He crows happily, eyes bright and excited. Tim laughs and shoves him, rolling onto his feet. Dick follows him a moment later, movements smooth with the inherent grace he's always had. "C'mon," he says, wrapping a hand around Tim's wrist. "Alf made your favorite for breakfast. He also bought a bag of that coffee you like so much."

Tim lets Dick guide him downstairs, and he's met with the smell of Alfred's cooking and his favorite coffee roast. Bruce is already waiting at the dining table, newspaper in hand, and he glances up to wish Tim a happy birthday. It strikes Tim that he hasn't heard that from Bruce in three years. They'd celebrated his seventeenth together as a family, but then Bruce got lost in time, and things fell apart. He'd died on his eighteenth birthday, but at least these past two years, he's been able to celebrate with the Titans.

He'd left his team the night before, flying back to Gotham after they

went out for dinner at one of Tim's favorite restaurants in San Francisco. Tim was apprehensive at first, when the Bats invited him to spend his birthday in Gotham, but he's actually finding himself excited for the day. He sits down on Bruce's left side. He hears the front door open and shut, followed by heavy footsteps.

"Hey Baby Bird, there's a package for ya," Jason's voice calls from the foyer. He walks into the room with a box tucked under his arm. "It's addressed to *'The Little Shit'* but doesn't have a return address." He sets the box down on the table and ruffles Tim's hair.

"Ah, that's probably Slade's gift," Tim says. He snags a knife from Jason's belt and opens the box, ignoring Jason's indignant grumble. Tim hands back the knife and smiles at the contents of the gift.

"Is it some sorta weapon?" Jason asks, intrigued.

"C'mon Jay," Dick says, leaning forward and propping his elbows up on the table. "It's gotta be a weapon. This is *Slade* we're talking about here."

"Wrong," Tim says cheerfully. He shows off the souvenir sweatshirt, smiling widely. "It's a touristy memento from the town we stayed at while we were in Ukraine."

"That's surprisingly thoughtful," Dick says. Jason snorts and moves to take his place at the table next to Tim. Damian wanders in a few minutes later, rubbing his eyes and blinking sleepily at them.

"Welcome back," he greets Tim politely. He'd already been sent off to bed by the time Tim had flown into Gotham. "Happy birthday, Timothy."

“Thanks Damian,” he replies. “How’d your history test go last week?”

“I received a perfect score,” Damian says with a sniff. He sits down across from Tim, on Bruce’s other side. He leans against Dick, still drowsy. “Did you apprehend the murderer you were tracking down?” Tim nods as Alfred enters the room and sets a mug of coffee next to Tim. He pats Tim’s shoulder and offers him a smile.

“Oh, yeah. It’s honestly surprising that the case went cold in the first place. The killer wasn’t hard to find.” Alfred brings breakfast to the table and joins them. It’s a family meal, after all, so he’s happy to join them for the special occasion. Tim reaches for a blueberry scone, and the rest of the family serves themselves, all thanking Alfred for the meal. “So,” Tim says, after he’s finished off his first scone. “What’s the plan for today? Are there any ongoing cases I can help out with?”

“We’re taking the night off,” Bruce says. He places a hand on Tim’s shoulder, and Tim blinks up at him, surprised. “The Birds of Prey are going to take care of Gotham tonight, so we can spend time together, as a family. The girls will be here by dinnertime, and Dick suggested a movie night.”

“Steph and Cass are flying in from Hong Kong?” Tim asks. Bruce nods, and Tim grins. “That’s great! They didn’t tell me they were planning on coming back.”

“They wanted to surprise you,” Dick says. “I figured our resident workaholic would enjoy a peaceful night in, but we can do whatever you want this afternoon, until we have to pick them up from the airport.”

“Sounds perfect,” Tim says with a sigh. “There’s actually this

photography exhibit I've been wanting to see, so maybe we could check that out?"

"Certainly," Bruce says. "I've heard good things about some of the work on display." He looks over at Tim, smiling like he's sharing a secret, and Tim is quick to look away, still not used to so much attention.

They finish up breakfast with the usual amount of bickering and good-natured teasing. Tim relaxes, soaking in the company of his family while he's with them. He's been coming back to Gotham every few weeks for the past few months—ever since the Thanatos debacle. Every time, he makes sure he lets himself properly enjoy the time he has with each member of his family. They've done what they promised and have been working toward regaining his trust, and it's still such a foreign feeling, being wanted and loved by them, that he can't help but revel in it anytime he gets the chance to. They seem to understand how he feels, because sometimes Tim catches one of the Bats looking at him like they expect him to disappear again, like he's a marvel.

Jason slings an arm around Tim's shoulders, like he's caught on to what he's thinking. Tim smiles at his older brother, leaning against his side. They stay like that while the family chats, catching up after the meal. Dick pouts at Jason when Tim rests his head against his brother's shoulder.

"This isn't fair," Dick says, voice whiny. "I want snuggles too." Jason laughs, a low, rumbling sound, and sticks his tongue out.

"Snuggle with the Demon Brat," he says, forming the words around his own laughter. Dick pulls Damian into a hug, ignoring Tim's snickering as it joins Jason's. Damian's offended scoff is shortly followed by a squawk from Dick. A sharp jab to the ribs has Dick even more sullen, but his other three brothers all laugh at him. Bruce smiles and shakes his head fondly, used to their antics.

“I have a hug limit, Grayson,” Damian says. “One per day, and today, it goes to Timothy.” He grins at Tim, his smile mischievous and brimming with childish glee. It’s a rare expression on Damian’s face.

“Well?” Tim asks, standing and opening his arms. Damian hops up and crosses to the other side of the table, letting Tim pull him into a hug. Tim laughs at Dick’s scandalized expression, but he does enjoy the hug. Damian actually hugs him back, a warm embrace Tim wouldn’t ordinarily expect from him.

“I hope you know that this counts as your present from me,” Damian says, stepping back. Tim nods, still smiling.

“Don’t worry, Timmy! You still get presents from us!” Dick says brightly. He stands up and practically runs out of the room. “Be right back!” He calls over his shoulder. Alfred shakes his head as he and Jason begin to gather up the dishes and carry them back into the kitchen. Dick returns a few minutes later, carrying a few brightly wrapped boxes. He drops them on the table in front of Tim with a flourish. “Red Robin will get a few gifts too, but these,” Dick gestures to the presents, “are all for Tim.”

Dick leans over the back of Tim’s chair as he opens the gifts—a bag of that fancy coffee roast Tim loves from Alfred, a new lens for his camera from Bruce, a set of terrible horror movies from Jason, and a framed family photo from Dick. Tim brushes his fingers gently over their faces in the picture, remembering the sunshine of early spring filtering through the trees overhead, the floral scent drifting in on the breeze from Alfred’s garden, and the warmth of his family pressed closely around him as they posed together.

“Thank you,” Tim says softly, looking to each member of his family in turn. “I love you guys.” His family replies almost in unison, telling him they love him, too. His heart feels almost overwhelmed. Just

months ago, he thought he'd lost them forever, and now, they've let him learn how to be loved by them again. They drew Tim back into the family, and he's never felt more cherished by them.

Tim Drake started out his life with no family, and now he has both the Titans and the Bats. For the longest time, he was used to loving others without receiving anything in return, but now, he's fiercely loved by all of his favorite people in the world. The old hurts still linger sometimes, but the Bats have worked hard to make sure Tim knows just how much they want him around. He thinks he's ready to trust them again, because each time he comes back to Gotham, it gets a little easier.

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The art gallery isn't particularly busy, so the family can take their time as they meander through the exhibit. The amateur photographers have submitted photos meant to encapsulate Gotham as a city, and the gallery is filled with sweeping landscapes, pictures of busy streets, and portraits of its citizens. The best part of the exhibit takes up almost the entirety of the back wall. The anonymous photographer had sent in their fair share of landscape photos, showcasing the beauty of Gotham's skyline and its architecture, but the focus of this submission is Gotham's vigilantes.

There's a photo of Nightwing, mid-leap, a broad grin stretching across his handsome face, and there's another of Red Hood, leaning against the brick wall of a building in Crime Alley, cleaning one of his guns. A photo of Batman with his hand on Robin's shoulder is displayed next to one of Batgirl and Black Bat, laughing together as they sit on one of Gotham's many rooftops. A few others show all of the Bats, sometimes together, sometimes alone. The center of the display features a picture of Red Robin, with his signature, sharp smile, bo staff arcing through the air.

Tim recognizes most of the pictures as his own, taken over the years.

It takes his breath away to see his work on display, and he drinks in the sight of each of his photos, completely astounded. The photo of himself is a new one, though, and he looks at Bruce for an explanation.

"Barbara," is all he says, and Tim laughs, unsurprised. He turns back to his own work. It's surreal, seeing his photos hung up in a gallery like this. He'd never expected these pictures to see the light of day, but his family had sent them in to be shown off for the whole city. He feels a rush of pride sweep through him, and a giddy smile makes its way to his face.

"This is incredible," Tim says. "I can't believe my photos got picked. There must've been so many entries…"

"Your work is beautiful," Damian says. "You have an excellent eye for photography."

"Agreed," Jason says. He rests an arm against Tim's shoulder. "Plus, most photographers aren't smart enough *and* stupid enough to follow the Bats around. Makes your work unique."

"Thank you," Tim says. He feels his eyes prickle with tears. Photography was how he'd found his way to the Bats, in the first place. It linked him to them before they even met, and to see his photos proudly displayed in the exhibit makes his chest crack open with nostalgia. His family might be the only ones who know the true meaning behind these photos, but they've still broadcasted that tie, that connection between the lonely little boy and the family he wanted and eventually found, to the rest of Gotham.

Tim's eyes drift to his favorite photo of the bunch, a picture he'd taken during Jason's days as Robin. He and Nightwing are laughing together while Batman watches from the side, a tiny smile on his face. Jason

comes to stand beside him, arm brushing against Tim's shoulder.

"Ya really did justice to him," he says, motioning toward the photo of himself as Robin.

"He was my hero," Tim replies, smiling. He bumps his shoulder against Jason's side. "Still is, to be honest."

"Fuckin' sap," Jason grumbles. "Everyone knows the third Robin was better."

"He *was* smart enough to wear pants," Tim agrees. He checks his watch and turns toward Bruce. "Hey B, we should probably start heading to the airport." Bruce nods, and the group all takes one last look at Tim's photographs lining the walls before they turn and head back outside.

The ride to the airport and subsequent wait for the plane to land is relatively quiet, but that quickly ends as soon as Stephanie and Cass emerge from the crowd. Stephanie shouts out birthday wishes and launches herself at Tim, who has to catch her before she can send them both crashing to the ground. She laughs brightly in his ear and hugs him tightly. Once she steps back, Cass takes her place, pressing a kiss to her brother's cheek and offering him an affectionate smile.

"Missed you," she says. "Happy birthday."

"I missed you too," Tim replies. "My day definitely just got happier. It's really great to see you two."

"You too!" Steph says happily. "Now let's go. I'm starving, and it's

been way too long since I've had Alfred's cooking."

They pile back into the car and head back to the manor. It's already late afternoon, but as soon as they get back, Stephanie raids the pantry for some of the leftovers from breakfast. Tim and the girls sprawl out in one of the sitting rooms, chatting amiably and catching up. He hasn't seen either of them since they left for Hong Kong together last month, and he's missed them. Steph paints her nails as she sits on the floor, leaning her back against Tim's legs. He's on one of the couches, with Cass curled against his side. Tim nearly drifts off a few times while they're relaxing, but their stories of their time abroad keep him awake.

After an hour or so, Steph stands and stretches, leaving the room to fetch the girls' presents for him. Steph's gift is unwrapped. She just throws a purple hoodie at Tim's face, laughing at his offended expression when he catches it. It's tacky, with a ridiculous pun printed on the front, and Tim loves it. Cass had gotten him a little pendant on a leather cord—a Robin. She smiles at him when she spots the soft look in his eyes, his fingers trailing over the delicate shape of the bird. He immediately pulls it over his head, the Robin resting against his sternum, near his heart.

Alfred comes to fetch them for dinner, and Tim and the girls trail after him, following the smell of his cooking. Tim stops Alfred before they can enter the dining room, pulling the old butler into a hug. Alfred pats him gently on the back, smiling fondly.

"I'm so glad to have my family back together," Alfred admits softly. "It grieved me to see you so distanced from us, and I'm truly thankful your brothers and father have come to their senses regarding their treatment of you, my dear boy."

They enter the dining room and start eating. Dinner is delicious, of course, and Alfred had taken the time to make all of Tim's favorites. The meal is loud, with the whole family gathered together like this,

but it's perfect. Tim is surrounded by some of the people he loves most in the world, and he's touched they've all gathered together to celebrate with him. After they're done with dinner, Alfred brings out a beautiful cake, and the group sings to Tim—loudly and obnoxiously.

Stephanie and Dick start cheering for Tim to make a wish and blow out the candles. Tim and Jason make eye contact, and Jason offers him a sad little smile. They both seem to be thinking about the last time they'd shared a birthday cake together, right after Jason had resuscitated Tim. The stark contrast between then and now is something Tim never thought would've been possible for him. He closes his eyes and makes his wish—to keep these wonderful people in his life.

After they've all stuffed themselves with cake, the family retreats to the theater room and sprawls out on the couches and cozy chairs. Blankets and pillows are tossed around until everyone is comfortable, and Tim finds himself leaning against Dick, his feet draped over Jason's legs. He's wrapped up in a fluffy blanket and the purple hoodie, and soon enough, he's practically melted against Dick's side. Steph picks out one of the awful movies Jason gave Tim and sets it to play.

The movie is terrible, in a hilarious way, as most of Tim's favorite films are. His stomach hurts from laughing so much, but by the time they start the second movie, he's starting to get drowsy. Dick's fingers carding through his hair don't help matters, and he rests his head against his brother's shoulder, feeling warm and content. His eyes close, and he stops focusing on the movie, attention shifting to the people around him, instead.

Stephanie and Cass whisper and giggle together, making fun of the plot, while Damian leans against his father, both looking confused as to why exactly they've chosen to watch such awful movies. Dick and Jason are on either side of Tim, and they seem to sense that he's about to nod off, because their conversation hushes a little as he gets more and more tired. Dick continues to stroke his hair, and Jason eventually moves Tim's legs, so he's stretched out more comfortably. Dick gently

rests Tim's head in his lap, smiling when Tim cracks an eye open to look up at him.

"Happy birthday, Timmy," he says softly. "Did you have a good day?"

"Yeah," Tim murmurs. "The best. I'm glad I had you guys with me today."

"Of course," Dick says. "We're happy you let us celebrate with you." His expression softens, and he brushes some of Tim's hair out of his eyes. "Thank you for being here, Tim."

"I'll always be here," Tim says, voice sleepy, syllables blurring together. "I love you guys."

"We love you too, Tim. So, *so* much."

He's barely conscious, but Tim can feel the words soak into his skin, carried right to his heart by his bloodstream. He weighs them in his mind, and as the warm comfort of rest cradles his thoughts, his head and his heart align with approval. He feels those words curl around him, like armor and light and belief. He sinks into sleep, curled up against his older brothers, heart overflowing with thoughts of family and acceptance. He's not going to lose them again. They've shown him how much they care, how much he's wanted—not just needed. The bonds with his family have been strengthened into something unbreakable.

Even when he thought those ties were broken, they were always extant, and they always will be.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. I hope you've enjoyed Extant, as I've certainly enjoyed writing it. I've been absolutely blown away by the response to my work, and I just want to say thank you so much to each of you, dear readers! Your kind comments and engagement with this story have been so incredible, and it warms my heart to have had such a great introduction to writing for this fandom. I hope you continue to enjoy my future work, and trust me, I have a lot of plans for more stories in the future! Until then, take care, and once again, thank you so very much.

- Kgraces

Read the follow-up fic here

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!